THE SECOND EPOCH

THE STORY CONTINUED BY MARIAN HALCOMBE.

I

BLACKWATER PARK, HAMPSHIRE.

June 11th, 1850.--Six months to look back on--six long, lonely months since Laura and I last saw each other!

How many days have I still to wait? Only one! To-morrow, the twelfth, the travellers return to England. I can hardly realise my own happiness--I can hardly believe that the next four-and-twenty hours will complete the last day of separation between Laura and me.

She and her husband have been in Italy all the winter, and afterwards in the Tyrol. They come back, accompanied by Count Fosco and his wife, who propose to settle somewhere in the neighbourhood of London, and who have engaged to stay at Blackwater Park for the summer months before deciding on a place of residence. So long as Laura returns, no matter who returns with her. Sir Percival may fill the house from floor to ceiling, if he likes, on condition that his wife and I inhabit it together.

Meanwhile, here I am, established at Blackwater Park, "the ancient and interesting seat" (as the county history obligingly informs me) "of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart.," and the future abiding-place (as I may now venture to add on my account) of plain Marian Halcombe, spinster, now settled in a snug little sitting-room, with a cup of tea by her side, and all her earthly possessions ranged round her in three boxes and a bag.

I left Limmeridge yesterday, having received Laura's delightful letter from Paris the day before. I had been previously uncertain whether I was to meet them in London or in Hampshire, but this last letter informed me that Sir Percival proposed to land at Southampton, and to travel straight on to his country-house. He has spent so much money abroad that he has none left to defray the expenses of living in London for the remainder of the season, and he is economically resolved to pass the summer and autumn quietly at

Blackwater. Laura has had more than enough of excitement and change of scene, and is pleased at the prospect of country tranquillity and retirement which her husband's prudence provides for her. As for me, I am ready to be happy anywhere in her society. We are all, therefore, well contented in our various ways, to begin with.

Last night I slept in London, and was delayed there so long to-day by various calls and commissions, that I did not reach Blackwater this evening till after dusk.

Judging by my vague impressions of the place thus far, it is the exact opposite of Limmeridge.

The house is situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in--almost suffocated, to my north-country notions, by trees. I have seen nobody but the man-servant who opened the door to me, and the housekeeper, a very civil person, who showed me the way to my own room, and got me my tea. I have a nice little boudoir and bedroom, at the end of a long passage on the first floor. The servants and some of the spare rooms are on the second floor, and all the living rooms are on the ground floor. I have not seen one of them yet, and I know nothing about the house, except that one wing of it is said to be five hundred years old, that it had a moat round it once, and that it gets its name of Blackwater from a lake in the park.

Eleven o'clock has just struck, in a ghostly and solemn manner, from a turret over the centre of the house, which I saw when I came in. A large dog has been woke, apparently by the sound of the bell, and is howling and yawning drearily, somewhere round a corner. I hear echoing footsteps in the passages below, and the iron thumping of bolts and bars at the house door. The servants are evidently going to bed. Shall I follow their example?

No, I am not half sleepy enough. Sleepy, did I say? I feel as if I should never close my eyes again. The bare anticipation of seeing that dear face, and hearing that well-known voice to-morrow, keeps me in a perpetual fever of excitement. If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun--a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the house-keeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.

Reading is out of the question--I can't fix my attention on books. Let me try

if I can write myself into sleepiness and fatigue. My journal has been very much neglected of late. What can I recall--standing, as I now do, on the threshold of a new life--of persons and events, of chances and changes, during the past six months--the long, weary, empty interval since Laura's wedding-day?

Walter Hartright is uppermost in my memory, and he passes first in the shadowy procession of my absent friends. I received a few lines from him, after the landing of the expedition in Honduras, written more cheerfully and hopefully than he has written yet. A month or six weeks later I saw an extract from an American newspaper, describing the departure of the adventurers on their inland journey. They were last seen entering a wild primeval forest, each man with his rifle on his shoulder and his baggage at his back. Since that time, civilisation has lost all trace of them. Not a line more have I received from Walter, not a fragment of news from the expedition has appeared in any of the public journals.

The same dense, disheartening obscurity hangs over the fate and fortunes of Anne Catherick, and her companion, Mrs. Clements. Nothing whatever has been heard of either of them. Whether they are in the country or out of it, whether they are living or dead, no one knows. Even Sir Percival's solicitor has lost all hope, and has ordered the useless search after the fugitives to be finally given up.

Our good old friend Mr. Gilmore has met with a sad check in his active professional career. Early in the spring we were alarmed by hearing that he had been found insensible at his desk, and that the seizure was pronounced to be an apoplectic fit. He had been long complaining of fulness and oppression in the head, and his doctor had warned him of the consequences that would follow his persistency in continuing to work, early and late, as if he were still a young man. The result now is that he has been positively ordered to keep out of his office for a year to come, at least, and to seek repose of body and relief of mind by altogether changing his usual mode of life. The business is left, accordingly, to be carried on by his partner, and he is himself, at this moment, away in Germany, visiting some relations who are settled there in mercantile pursuits. Thus another true friend and trustworthy adviser is lost to us--lost, I earnestly hope and trust, for a time only.

Poor Mrs. Vesey travelled with me as far as London. It was impossible to abandon her to solitude at Limmeridge after Laura and I had both left the house, and we have arranged that she is to live with an unmarried younger sister of hers, who keeps a school at Clapham. She is to come here this

autumn to visit her pupil--I might almost say her adopted child. I saw the good old lady safe to her destination, and left her in the care of her relative, quietly happy at the prospect of seeing Laura again in a few months' time.

As for Mr. Fairlie, I believe I am guilty of no injustice if I describe him as being unutterably relieved by having the house clear of us women. The idea of his missing his niece is simply preposterous--he used to let months pass in the old times without attempting to see her--and in my case and Mrs. Vesey's, I take leave to consider his telling us both that he was half heart-broken at our departure, to be equivalent to a confession that he was secretly rejoiced to get rid of us. His last caprice has led him to keep two photographers incessantly employed in producing sun-pictures of all the treasures and curiosities in his possession. One complete copy of the collection of the photographs is to be presented to the Mechanics' Institution of Carlisle, mounted on the finest cardboard, with ostentatious red-letter inscriptions underneath, "Madonna and Child by Raphael. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire." "Copper coin of the period of Tiglath Pileser. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire." "Unique Rembrandt etching. Known all over Europe as THE SMUDGE, from a printer's blot in the corner which exists in no other copy. Valued at three hundred guineas. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esq." Dozens of photographs of this sort, and all inscribed in this manner, were completed before I left Cumberland, and hundreds more remain to be done. With this new interest to occupy him, Mr. Fairlie will be a happy man for months and months to come, and the two unfortunate photographers will share the social martyrdom which he has hitherto inflicted on his valet alone.

So much for the persons and events which hold the foremost place in my memory. What next of the one person who holds the foremost place in my heart? Laura has been present to my thoughts all the while I have been writing these lines. What can I recall of her during the past six months, before I close my journal for the night?

I have only her letters to guide me, and on the most important of all the questions which our correspondence can discuss, every one of those letters leaves me in the dark.

Does he treat her kindly? Is she happier now than she was when I parted with her on the wedding-day? All my letters have contained these two inquiries, put more or less directly, now in one form, and now in another, and all, on that point only, have remained without reply, or have been answered as if my questions merely related to the state of her health. She informs me, over and over again, that she is perfectly well--that travelling

agrees with her--that she is getting through the winter, for the first time in her life, without catching cold--but not a word can I find anywhere which tells me plainly that she is reconciled to her marriage, and that she can now look back to the twenty-second of December without any bitter feelings of repentance and regret. The name of her husband is only mentioned in her letters, as she might mention the name of a friend who was travelling with them, and who had undertaken to make all the arrangements for the journey. "Sir Percival" has settled that we leave on such a day--"Sir Percival" has decided that we travel by such a road. Sometimes she writes "Percival" only, but very seldom--in nine cases out of ten she gives him his title.

I cannot find that his habits and opinions have changed and coloured hers in any single particular. The usual moral transformation which is insensibly wrought in a young, fresh, sensitive woman by her marriage, seems never to have taken place in Laura. She writes of her own thoughts and impressions, amid all the wonders she has seen, exactly as she might have written to some one else, if I had been travelling with her instead of her husband. I see no betrayal anywhere of sympathy of any kind existing between them. Even when she wanders from the subject of her travels, and occupies herself with the prospects that await her in England, her speculations are busied with her future as my sister, and persistently neglect to notice her future as Sir Percival's wife. In all this there is no undertone of complaint to warn me that she is absolutely unhappy in her married life. The impression I have derived from our correspondence does not, thank God, lead me to any such distressing conclusion as that. I only see a sad torpor, an unchangeable indifference, when I turn my mind from her in the old character of a sister, and look at her, through the medium of her letters, in the new character of a wife. In other words, it is always Laura Fairlie who has been writing to me for the last six months, and never Lady Glyde.

The strange silence which she maintains on the subject of her husband's character and conduct, she preserves with almost equal resolution in the few references which her later letters contain to the name of her husband's bosom friend, Count Fosco.

For some unexplained reason the Count and his wife appear to have changed their plans abruptly, at the end of last autumn, and to have gone to Vienna instead of going to Rome, at which latter place Sir Percival had expected to find them when he left England. They only quitted Vienna in the spring, and travelled as far as the Tyrol to meet the bride and bridegroom on their homeward journey. Laura writes readily enough about the meeting with Madame Fosco, and assures me that she has found her aunt so much

changed for the better--so much quieter, and so much more sensible as a wife than she was as a single woman--that I shall hardly know her again when I see her here. But on the subject of Count Fosco (who interests me infinitely more than his wife), Laura is provokingly circumspect and silent. She only says that he puzzles her, and that she will not tell me what her impression of him is until I have seen him, and formed my own opinion first.

This, to my mind, looks ill for the Count. Laura has preserved, far more perfectly than most people do in later life, the child's subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct, and if I am right in assuming that her first impression of Count Fosco has not been favourable, I for one am in some danger of doubting and distrusting that illustrious foreigner before I have so much as set eyes on him. But, patience, patience--this uncertainty, and many uncertainties more, cannot last much longer. To-morrow will see all my doubts in a fair way of being cleared up, sooner or later.

Twelve o'clock has struck, and I have just come back to close these pages, after looking out at my open window.

It is a still, sultry, moonless night. The stars are dull and few. The trees that shut out the view on all sides look dimly black and solid in the distance, like a great wall of rock. I hear the croaking of frogs, faint and far off, and the echoes of the great clock hum in the airless calm long after the strokes have ceased. I wonder how Blackwater Park will look in the daytime? I don't altogether like it by night.

12th.--A day of investigations and discoveries--a more interesting day, for many reasons, than I had ventured to anticipate.

I began my sight-seeing, of course, with the house.

The main body of the building is of the time of that highly-overrated woman, Queen Elizabeth. On the ground floor there are two hugely long galleries, with low ceilings lying parallel with each other, and rendered additionally dark and dismal by hideous family portraits--every one of which I should like to burn. The rooms on the floor above the two galleries are kept in tolerable repair, but are very seldom used. The civil housekeeper, who acted as my guide, offered to show me over them, but considerately added that she feared I should find them rather out of order. My respect for the integrity of my own petticoats and stockings infinitely exceeds my respect for all the Elizabethan bedrooms in the kingdom, so I positively declined exploring the upper regions of dust and dirt at the risk of soiling my nice clean clothes. The housekeeper said, "I am quite of your opinion, miss," and appeared to

think me the most sensible woman she had met with for a long time past.

So much, then, for the main building. Two wings are added at either end of it. The half-ruined wing on the left (as you approach the house) was once a place of residence standing by itself, and was built in the fourteenth century. One of Sir Percival's maternal ancestors--I don't remember, and don't care which--tacked on the main building, at right angles to it, in the aforesaid Queen Elizabeth's time. The housekeeper told me that the architecture of "the old wing," both outside and inside, was considered remarkably fine by good judges. On further investigation I discovered that good judges could only exercise their abilities on Sir Percival's piece of antiquity by previously dismissing from their minds all fear of damp, darkness, and rats. Under these circumstances, I unhesitatingly acknowledged myself to be no judge at all, and suggested that we should treat "the old wing" precisely as we had previously treated the Elizabethan bedrooms. Once more the housekeeper said, "I am quite of your opinion, miss," and once more she looked at me with undisguised admiration of my extraordinary common-sense.

We went next to the wing on the right, which was built, by way of completing the wonderful architectural jumble at Blackwater Park, in the time of George the Second.

This is the habitable part of the house, which has been repaired and redecorated inside on Laura's account. My two rooms, and all the good bedrooms besides, are on the first floor, and the basement contains a drawing-room, a dining-room, a morning-room, a library, and a pretty little boudoir for Laura, all very nicely ornamented in the bright modern way, and all very elegantly furnished with the delightful modern luxuries. None of the rooms are anything like so large and airy as our rooms at Limmeridge, but they all look pleasant to live in. I was terribly afraid, from what I had heard of Blackwater Park, of fatiguing antique chairs, and dismal stained glass, and musty, frouzy hangings, and all the barbarous lumber which people born without a sense of comfort accumulate about them, in defiance of the consideration due to the convenience of their friends. It is an inexpressible relief to find that the nineteenth century has invaded this strange future home of mine, and has swept the dirty "good old times" out of the way of our daily life.

I dawdled away the morning--part of the time in the rooms downstairs, and part out of doors in the great square which is formed by the three sides of the house, and by the lofty iron railings and gates which protect it in front. A large circular fish-pond with stone sides, and an allegorical leaden

monster in the middle, occupies the centre of the square. The pond itself is full of gold and silver fish, and is encircled by a broad belt of the softest turf I ever walked on. I loitered here on the shady side pleasantly enough till luncheon-time, and after that took my broad straw hat and wandered out alone in the warm lovely sunlight to explore the grounds.

Daylight confirmed the impression which I had felt the night before, of there being too many trees at Blackwater. The house is stifled by them. They are, for the most part, young, and planted far too thickly. I suspect there must have been a ruinous cutting down of timber all over the estate before Sir Percival's time, and an angry anxiety on the part of the next possessor to fill up all the gaps as thickly and rapidly as possible. After looking about me in front of the house, I observed a flower-garden on my left hand, and walked towards it to see what I could discover in that direction.

On a nearer view the garden proved to be small and poor and ill kept. I left it behind me, opened a little gate in a ring fence, and found myself in a plantation of fir-trees.

A pretty winding path, artificially made, led me on among the trees, and my north-country experience soon informed me that I was approaching sandy, heathy ground. After a walk of more than half a mile, I should think, among the firs, the path took a sharp turn--the trees abruptly ceased to appear on either side of me, and I found myself standing suddenly on the margin of a vast open space, and looking down at the Blackwater lake from which the house takes its name.

The ground, shelving away below me, was all sand, with a few little heathy hillocks to break the monotony of it in certain places. The lake itself had evidently once flowed to the spot on which I stood, and had been gradually wasted and dried up to less than a third of its former size. I saw its still, stagnant waters, a quarter of a mile away from me in the hollow, separated into pools and ponds by twining reeds and rushes, and little knolls of earth. On the farther bank from me the trees rose thickly again, and shut out the view, and cast their black shadows on the sluggish, shallow water. As I walked down to the lake, I saw that the ground on its farther side was damp and marshy, overgrown with rank grass and dismal willows. The water, which was clear enough on the open sandy side, where the sun shone, looked black and poisonous opposite to me, where it lay deeper under the shade of the spongy banks, and the rank overhanging thickets and tangled trees. The frogs were croaking, and the rats were slipping in and out of the shadowy water, like live shadows themselves, as I got nearer to the marshy side of the lake. I saw here, lying half in and half out of the water, the

rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface, and a snake basking in the midst of the spot, fantastically coiled and treacherously still. Far and near the view suggested the same dreary impressions of solitude and decay, and the glorious brightness of the summer sky overhead seemed only to deepen and harden the gloom and barrenness of the wilderness on which it shone. I turned and retraced my steps to the high heathy ground, directing them a little aside from my former path towards a shabby old wooden shed, which stood on the outer skirt of the fir plantation, and which had hitherto been too unimportant to share my notice with the wide, wild prospect of the lake.

On approaching the shed I found that it had once been a boat-house, and that an attempt had apparently been made to convert it afterwards into a sort of rude arbour, by placing inside it a firwood seat, a few stools, and a table. I entered the place, and sat down for a little while to rest and get my breath again.

I had not been in the boat-house more than a minute when it struck me that the sound of my own quick breathing was very strangely echoed by something beneath me. I listened intently for a moment, and heard a low, thick, sobbing breath that seemed to come from the ground under the seat which I was occupying. My nerves are not easily shaken by trifles, but on this occasion I started to my feet in a fright--called out--received no answer--summoned back my recreant courage, and looked under the seat.

There, crouched up in the farthest corner, lay the forlorn cause of my terror, in the shape of a poor little dog--a black and white spaniel. The creature moaned feebly when I looked at it and called to it, but never stirred. I moved away the seat and looked closer. The poor little dog's eyes were glazing fast, and there were spots of blood on its glossy white side. The misery of a weak, helpless, dumb creature is surely one of the saddest of all the mournful sights which this world can show. I lifted the poor dog in my arms as gently as I could, and contrived a sort of make-shift hammock for him to lie in, by gathering up the front of my dress all round him. In this way I took the creature, as painlessly as possible, and as fast as possible, back to the house.

Finding no one in the hall I went up at once to my own sitting-room, made a bed for the dog with one of my old shawls, and rang the bell. The largest and fattest of all possible house-maids answered it, in a state of cheerful stupidity which would have provoked the patience of a saint. The girl's fat, shapeless face actually stretched into a broad grin at the sight of the

wounded creature on the floor.

"What do you see there to laugh at?" I asked, as angrily as if she had been a servant of my own. "Do you know whose dog it is?"

"No, miss, that I certainly don't." She stooped, and looked down at the spaniel's injured side--brightened suddenly with the irradiation of a new idea--and pointing to the wound with a chuckle of satisfaction, said, "That's Baxter's doings, that is."

I was so exasperated that I could have boxed her ears. "Baxter?" I said. "Who is the brute you call Baxter?"

The girl grinned again more cheerfully than ever. "Bless you, miss! Baxter's the keeper, and when he finds strange dogs hunting about, he takes and shoots 'em. It's keeper's dooty miss, I think that dog will die. Here's where he's been shot, ain't it? That's Baxter's doings, that is. Baxter's doings, miss, and Baxter's dooty."

I was almost wicked enough to wish that Baxter had shot the housemaid instead of the dog. Seeing that it was quite useless to expect this densely impenetrable personage to give me any help in relieving the suffering creature at our feet, I told her to request the housekeeper's attendance with my compliments. She went out exactly as she had come in, grinning from ear to ear. As the door closed on her she said to herself softly, "It's Baxter's doings and Baxter's dooty--that's what it is."

The housekeeper, a person of some education and intelligence, thoughtfully brought upstairs with her some milk and some warm water. The instant she saw the dog on the floor she started and changed colour.

"Why, Lord bless me," cried the housekeeper, "that must be Mrs. Catherick's dog!"

"Whose?" I asked, in the utmost astonishment.

"Mrs. Catherick's. You seem to know Mrs. Catherick, Miss Halcombe?"

"Not personally, but I have heard of her. Does she live here? Has she had any news of her daughter?"

"No, Miss Halcombe, she came here to ask for news."

"When?"

"Only yesterday. She said some one had reported that a stranger answering to the description of her daughter had been seen in our neighbourhood. No such report has reached us here, and no such report was known in the village, when I sent to make inquiries there on Mrs. Catherick's account. She certainly brought this poor little dog with her when she came, and I saw it trot out after her when she went away. I suppose the creature strayed into the plantations, and got shot. Where did you find it, Miss Halcombe?"

"In the old shed that looks out on the lake."

"Ah, yes, that is the plantation side, and the poor thing dragged itself, I suppose, to the nearest shelter, as dogs will, to die. If you can moisten its lips with the milk, Miss Halcombe, I will wash the clotted hair from the wound. I am very much afraid it is too late to do any good. However, we can but try."

Mrs. Catherick! The name still rang in my ears, as if the housekeeper had only that moment surprised me by uttering it. While we were attending to the dog, the words of Walter Hartright's caution to me returned to my memory: "If ever Anne Catherick crosses your path, make better use of the opportunity, Miss Halcombe, than I made of it." The finding of the wounded spaniel had led me already to the discovery of Mrs. Catherick's visit to Blackwater Park, and that event might lead in its turn, to something more. I determined to make the most of the chance which was now offered to me, and to gain as much information as I could.

"Did you say that Mrs. Catherick lived anywhere in this neighbourhood?" I asked.

"Oh dear, no," said the housekeeper. "She lives at Welmingham, quite at the other end of the county--five-and-twenty miles off, at least."

"I suppose you have known Mrs. Catherick for some years?"

"On the contrary, Miss Halcombe, I never saw her before she came here yesterday. I had heard of her, of course, because I had heard of Sir Percival's kindness in putting her daughter under medical care. Mrs. Catherick is rather a strange person in her manners, but extremely respectable-looking. She seemed sorely put out when she found that there was no foundation--none, at least, that any of us could discover--for the report of her daughter having been seen in this neighbourhood."

"I am rather interested about Mrs. Catherick," I went on, continuing the conversation as long as possible. "I wish I had arrived here soon enough to see her yesterday. Did she stay for any length of time?"

"Yes," said the housekeeper, "she stayed for some time; and I think she would have remained longer, if I had not been called away to speak to a strange gentleman--a gentleman who came to ask when Sir Percival was expected back. Mrs. Catherick got up and left at once, when she heard the maid tell me what the visitor's errand was. She said to me, at parting, that there was no need to tell Sir Percival of her coming here. I thought that rather an odd remark to make, especially to a person in my responsible situation."

I thought it an odd remark too. Sir Percival had certainly led me to believe, at Limmeridge, that the most perfect confidence existed between himself and Mrs. Catherick. If that was the case, why should she be anxious to have her visit at Blackwater Park kept a secret from him?

"Probably," I said, seeing that the housekeeper expected me to give my opinion on Mrs. Catherick's parting words, "probably she thought the announcement of her visit might vex Sir Percival to no purpose, by reminding him that her lost daughter was not found yet. Did she talk much on that subject?"

"Very little," replied the housekeeper. "She talked principally of Sir Percival, and asked a great many questions about where he had been travelling, and what sort of lady his new wife was. She seemed to be more soured and put out than distressed, by failing to find any traces of her daughter in these parts. 'I give her up,' were the last words she said that I can remember; 'I give her up, ma'am, for lost.' And from that she passed at once to her questions about Lady Glyde, wanting to know if she was a handsome, amiable lady, comely and healthy and young----Ah, dear! I thought how it would end. Look, Miss Halcombe, the poor thing is out of its misery at last!"

The dog was dead. It had given a faint, sobbing cry, it had suffered an instant's convulsion of the limbs, just as those last words, "comely and healthy and young," dropped from the housekeeper's lips. The change had happened with startling suddenness--in one moment the creature lay lifeless under our hands.

Eight o'clock. I have just returned from dining downstairs, in solitary state. The sunset is burning redly on the wilderness of trees that I see from my

window, and I am poring over my journal again, to calm my impatience for the return of the travellers. They ought to have arrived, by my calculations, before this. How still and lonely the house is in the drowsy evening quiet! Oh me! how many minutes more before I hear the carriage wheels and run downstairs to find myself in Laura's arms?

The poor little dog! I wish my first day at Blackwater Park had not been associated with death, though it is only the death of a stray animal.

Welmingham--I see, on looking back through these private pages of mine, that Welmingham is the name of the place where Mrs. Catherick lives. Her note is still in my possession, the note in answer to that letter about her unhappy daughter which Sir Percival obliged me to write. One of these days, when I can find a safe opportunity, I will take the note with me by way of introduction, and try what I can make of Mrs. Catherick at a personal interview. I don't understand her wishing to conceal her visit to this place from Sir Percival's knowledge, and I don't feel half so sure, as the housekeeper seems to do, that her daughter Anne is not in the neighbourhood after all. What would Walter Hartright have said in this emergency? Poor, dear Hartright! I am beginning to feel the want of his honest advice and his willing help already.

Surely I heard something. Was it a bustle of footsteps below stairs? Yes! I hear the horses' feet--I hear the rolling wheels----

II

June 15th.--The confusion of their arrival has had time to subside. Two days have elapsed since the return of the travellers, and that interval has sufficed to put the new machinery of our lives at Blackwater Park in fair working order. I may now return to my journal, with some little chance of being able to continue the entries in it as collectedly as usual.

I think I must begin by putting down an odd remark which has suggested itself to me since Laura came back.

When two members of a family or two intimate friends are separated, and one goes abroad and one remains at home, the return of the relative or friend who has been travelling always seems to place the relative or friend who has been staying at home at a painful disadvantage when the two first meet. The sudden encounter of the new thoughts and new habits eagerly gained in the one case, with the old thoughts and old habits passively preserved in the other, seems at first to part the sympathies of the most loving relatives and the fondest friends, and to set a sudden strangeness, unexpected by both and uncontrollable by both, between them on either side. After the first happiness of my meeting with Laura was over, after we had sat down together hand in hand to recover breath enough and calmness enough to talk, I felt this strangeness instantly, and I could see that she felt it too. It has partially worn away, now that we have fallen back into most of our old habits, and it will probably disappear before long. But it has certainly had an influence over the first impressions that I have formed of her, now that we are living together again--for which reason only I have thought fit to mention it here.

She has found me unaltered, but I have found her changed.

Changed in person, and in one respect changed in character. I cannot absolutely say that she is less beautiful than she used to be--I can only say that she is less beautiful to me.

Others, who do not look at her with my eyes and my recollections, would probably think her improved. There is more colour and more decision and roundness of outline in her face than there used to be, and her figure seems more firmly set and more sure and easy in all its movements than it was in her maiden days. But I miss something when I look at her--something that once belonged to the happy, innocent life of Laura Fairlie, and that I cannot

find in Lady Glyde. There was in the old times a freshness, a softness, an ever-varying and yet ever-remaining tenderness of beauty in her face, the charm of which it is not possible to express in words, or, as poor Hartright used often to say, in painting either. This is gone. I thought I saw the faint reflection of it for a moment when she turned pale under the agitation of our sudden meeting on the evening of her return, but it has never reappeared since. None of her letters had prepared me for a personal change in her. On the contrary, they had led me to expect that her marriage had left her, in appearance at least, quite unaltered. Perhaps I read her letters wrongly in the past, and am now reading her face wrongly in the present? No matter! Whether her beauty has gained or whether it has lost in the last six months, the separation either way has made her own dear self more precious to me than ever, and that is one good result of her marriage, at any rate!

The second change, the change that I have observed in her character, has not surprised me, because I was prepared for it in this case by the tone of her letters. Now that she is at home again, I find her just as unwilling to enter into any details on the subject of her married life as I had previously found her all through the time of our separation, when we could only communicate with each other by writing. At the first approach I made to the forbidden topic she put her hand on my lips with a look and gesture which touchingly, almost painfully, recalled to my memory the days of her girlhood and the happy bygone time when there were no secrets between us.

"Whenever you and I are together, Marian," she said, "we shall both be happier and easier with one another, if we accept my married life for what it is, and say and think as little about it as possible. I would tell you everything, darling, about myself," she went on, nervously buckling and unbuckling the ribbon round my waist, "if my confidences could only end there. But they could not--they would lead me into confidences about my husband too; and now I am married, I think I had better avoid them, for his sake, and for your sake, and for mine. I don't say that they would distress you, or distress me--I wouldn't have you think that for the world. But--I want to be so happy, now I have got you back again, and I want you to be so happy too----" She broke off abruptly, and looked round the room, my own sitting-room, in which we were talking. "Ah!" she cried, clapping her hands with a bright smile of recognition, "another old friend found already! Your book-case, Marian--your dear-little-shabby-old-satin-wood book-case--how glad I am you brought it with you from Limmeridge! And the horrid heavy man's umbrella, that you always would walk out with when it rained! And first and foremost of all, your own dear, dark, clever, gipsy-face, looking at me just as usual! It is so like home again to be here. How can we make it more like home still? I will put my father's portrait in your room instead of

in mine--and I will keep all my little treasures from Limmeridge here--and we will pass hours and hours every day with these four friendly walls round us. Oh, Marian!" she said, suddenly seating herself on a footstool at my knees, and looking up earnestly in my face, "promise you will never marry, and leave me. It is selfish to say so, but you are so much better off as a single woman--unless--unless you are very fond of your husband--but you won't be very fond of anybody but me, will you?" She stopped again, crossed my hands on my lap, and laid her face on them. "Have you been writing many letters, and receiving many letters lately?" she asked, in low, suddenly-altered tones. I understood what the question meant, but I thought it my duty not to encourage her by meeting her half way. "Have you heard from him?" she went on, coaxing me to forgive the more direct appeal on which she now ventured, by kissing my hands, upon which her face still rested. "Is he well and happy, and getting on in his profession? Has he recovered himself--and forgotten me?"

She should not have asked those questions. She should have remembered her own resolution, on the morning when Sir Percival held her to her marriage engagement, and when she resigned the book of Hartright's drawings into my hands for ever. But, ah me! where is the faultless human creature who can persevere in a good resolution, without sometimes failing and falling back? Where is the woman who has ever really torn from her heart the image that has been once fixed in it by a true love? Books tell us that such unearthly creatures have existed--but what does our own experience say in answer to books?

I made no attempt to remonstrate with her: perhaps, because I sincerely appreciated the fearless candour which let me see, what other women in her position might have had reasons for concealing even from their dearest friends--perhaps, because I felt, in my own heart and conscience, that in her place I should have asked the same questions and had the same thoughts. All I could honestly do was to reply that I had not written to him or heard from him lately, and then to turn the conversation to less dangerous topics.

There has been much to sadden me in our interview--my first confidential interview with her since her return. The change which her marriage has produced in our relations towards each other, by placing a forbidden subject between us, for the first time in our lives; the melancholy conviction of the dearth of all warmth of feeling, of all close sympathy, between her husband and herself, which her own unwilling words now force on my mind; the distressing discovery that the influence of that ill-fated attachment still remains (no matter how innocently, how harmlessly) rooted as deeply as ever in her heart--all these are disclosures to sadden any woman who loves

her as dearly, and feels for her as acutely, as I do.

There is only one consolation to set against them--a consolation that ought to comfort me, and that does comfort me. All the graces and gentleness of her character--all the frank affection of her nature--all the sweet, simple, womanly charms which used to make her the darling and delight of every one who approached her, have come back to me with herself. Of my other impressions I am sometimes a little inclined to doubt. Of this last, best, happiest of all impressions, I grow more and more certain every hour in the day.

Let me turn, now, from her to her travelling companions. Her husband must engage my attention first. What have I observed in Sir Percival, since his return, to improve my opinion of him?

I can hardly say. Small vexations and annoyances seem to have beset him since he came back, and no man, under those circumstances, is ever presented at his best. He looks, as I think, thinner than he was when he left England. His wearisome cough and his comfortless restlessness have certainly increased. His manner--at least his manner towards me--is much more abrupt than it used to be. He greeted me, on the evening of his return, with little or nothing of the ceremony and civility of former times--no polite speeches of welcome--no appearance of extraordinary gratification at seeing me--nothing but a short shake of the hand, and a sharp "How-d'ye-do, Miss Halcombe--glad to see you again." He seemed to accept me as one of the necessary fixtures of Blackwater Park, to be satisfied at finding me established in my proper place, and then to pass me over altogether.

Most men show something of their disposition in their own houses, which they have concealed elsewhere, and Sir Percival has already displayed a mania for order and regularity, which is quite a new revelation of him, so far as my previous knowledge of his character is concerned. If I take a book from the library and leave it on the table, he follows me and puts it back again. If I rise from a chair, and let it remain where I have been sitting, he carefully restores it to its proper place against the wall. He picks up stray flower-blossoms from the carpet, and mutters to himself as discontentedly as if they were hot cinders burning holes in it, and he storms at the servants if there is a crease in the tablecloth, or a knife missing from its place at the dinner-table, as fiercely as if they had personally insulted him.

I have already referred to the small annoyances which appear to have troubled him since his return. Much of the alteration for the worse which I have noticed in him may be due to these. I try to persuade myself that it is

so, because I am anxious not to be disheartened already about the future. It is certainly trying to any man's temper to be met by a vexation the moment he sets foot in his own house again, after a long absence, and this annoying circumstance did really happen to Sir Percival in my presence.

On the evening of their arrival the housekeeper followed me into the hall to receive her master and mistress and their guests. The instant he saw her, Sir Percival asked if any one had called lately. The housekeeper mentioned to him, in reply, what she had previously mentioned to me, the visit of the strange gentleman to make inquiries about the time of her master's return. He asked immediately for the gentleman's name. No name had been left. The gentleman's business? No business had been mentioned. What was the gentleman like? The housekeeper tried to describe him, but failed to distinguish the nameless visitor by any personal peculiarity which her master could recognise. Sir Percival frowned, stamped angrily on the floor, and walked on into the house, taking no notice of anybody. Why he should have been so discomposed by a trifle I cannot say--but he was seriously discomposed, beyond all doubt.

Upon the whole, it will be best, perhaps, if I abstain from forming a decisive opinion of his manners, language, and conduct in his own house, until time has enabled him to shake off the anxieties, whatever they may be, which now evidently troubled his mind in secret. I will turn over to a new page, and my pen shall let Laura's husband alone for the present.

The two guests--the Count and Countess Fosco--come next in my catalogue. I will dispose of the Countess first, so as to have done with the woman as soon as possible.

Laura was certainly not chargeable with any exaggeration, in writing me word that I should hardly recognise her aunt again when we met. Never before have I beheld such a change produced in a woman by her marriage as has been produced in Madame Fosco.

As Eleanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity. As Madame Fosco (aged three-and-forty), she sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself. The hideously ridiculous love-locks which used to hang on either side of her face are now replaced by stiff little rows of very short curls, of the sort one sees in old-fashioned wigs. A plain, matronly cap covers her head, and makes her look, for the first time in her life since I remember her, like a

decent woman. Nobody (putting her husband out of the question, of course) now sees in her, what everybody once saw--I mean the structure of the female skeleton, in the upper regions of the collar-bones and the shoulder-blades. Clad in quiet black or grey gowns, made high round the throat--dresses that she would have laughed at, or screamed at, as the whim of the moment inclined her, in her maiden days--she sits speechless in corners; her dry white hands (so dry that the pores of her skin look chalky) incessantly engaged, either in monotonous embroidery work or in rolling up endless cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking. On the few occasions when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are generally turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog. The only approach to an inward thaw which I have yet detected under her outer covering of icy constraint, has betrayed itself, once or twice, in the form of a suppressed tigerish jealousy of any woman in the house (the maids included) to whom the Count speaks, or on whom he looks with anything approaching to special interest or attention. Except in this one particular, she is always, morning, noon, and night, indoors and out, fair weather or foul, as cold as a statue, and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut. For the common purposes of society the extraordinary change thus produced in her is, beyond all doubt, a change for the better, seeing that it has transformed her into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way. How far she is really reformed or deteriorated in her secret self, is another question. I have once or twice seen sudden changes of expression on her pinched lips, and heard sudden inflexions of tone in her calm voice, which have led me to suspect that her present state of suppression may have sealed up something dangerous in her nature, which used to evaporate harmlessly in the freedom of her former life. It is quite possible that I may be altogether wrong in this idea. My own impression, however, is, that I am right. Time will show.

And the magician who has wrought this wonderful transformation--the foreign husband who has tamed this once wayward English woman till her own relations hardly know her again--the Count himself? What of the Count?

This in two words: He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, I should have made his cigarettes, as his wife does--I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers.

I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him. In two short days he has made his way straight into my favourable estimation, and how

he has worked the miracle is more than I can tell.

It absolutely startles me, now he is in my mind, to find how plainly I see him!--how much more plainly than I see Sir Percival, or Mr. Fairlie, or Walter Hartright, or any other absent person of whom I think, with the one exception of Laura herself! I can hear his voice, as if he was speaking at this moment. I know what his conversation was yesterday, as well as if I was hearing it now. How am I to describe him? There are peculiarities in his personal appearance, his habits, and his amusements, which I should blame in the boldest terms, or ridicule in the most merciless manner, if I had seen them in another man. What is it that makes me unable to blame them, or to ridicule them in HIM?

For example, he is immensely fat. Before this time I have always especially disliked corpulent humanity. I have always maintained that the popular notion of connecting excessive grossness of size and excessive good-humour as inseparable allies was equivalent to declaring, either that no people but amiable people ever get fat, or that the accidental addition of so many pounds of flesh has a directly favourable influence over the disposition of the person on whose body they accumulate. I have invariably combated both these absurd assertions by quoting examples of fat people who were as mean, vicious, and cruel as the leanest and the worst of their neighbours. I have asked whether Henry the Eighth was an amiable character? Whether Pope Alexander the Sixth was a good man? Whether Mr. Murderer and Mrs. Murderess Manning were not both unusually stout people? Whether hired nurses, proverbially as cruel a set of women as are to be found in all England, were not, for the most part, also as fat a set of women as are to be found in all England?--and so on, through dozens of other examples, modern and ancient, native and foreign, high and low. Holding these strong opinions on the subject with might and main as I do at this moment, here, nevertheless, is Count Fosco, as fat as Henry the Eighth himself, established in my favour, at one day's notice, without let or hindrance from his own odious corpulence. Marvellous indeed!

Is it his face that has recommended him?

It may be his face. He is a most remarkable likeness, on a large scale, of the great Napoleon. His features have Napoleon's magnificent regularity--his expression recalls the grandly calm, immovable power of the Great Soldier's face. This striking resemblance certainly impressed me, to begin with; but there is something in him besides the resemblance, which has impressed me more. I think the influence I am now trying to find is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw, and they have at times a cold,

clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel. Other parts of his face and head have their strange peculiarities. His complexion, for instance, has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown colour of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig, and his face, closely shaven all over, is smoother and freer from all marks and wrinkles than mine, though (according to Sir Percival's account of him) he is close on sixty years of age. But these are not the prominent personal characteristics which distinguish him, to my mind, from all the other men I have ever seen. The marked peculiarity which singles him out from the rank and file of humanity lies entirely, so far as I can tell at present, in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes.

His manner and his command of our language may also have assisted him, in some degree, to establish himself in my good opinion. He has that quiet deference, that look of pleased, attentive interest in listening to a woman, and that secret gentleness in his voice in speaking to a woman, which, say what we may, we can none of us resist. Here, too, his unusual command of the English language necessarily helps him. I had often heard of the extraordinary aptitude which many Italians show in mastering our strong, hard, Northern speech; but, until I saw Count Fosco, I had never supposed it possible that any foreigner could have spoken English as he speaks it. There are times when it is almost impossible to detect, by his accent that he is not a countryman of our own, and as for fluency, there are very few born Englishmen who can talk with as few stoppages and repetitions as the Count. He may construct his sentences more or less in the foreign way, but I have never yet heard him use a wrong expression, or hesitate for a moment in his choice of a word.

All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them. Fat as he is and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women, and more than that, with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself. He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the spaniels, so that I felt ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility by comparison with the Count.

The relation of this last incident reminds me of one of his most curious peculiarities, which I have not yet mentioned--his extraordinary fondness for pet animals.

Some of these he has left on the Continent, but he has brought with him to this house a cockatoo, two canary-birds, and a whole family of white mice. He attends to all the necessities of these strange favourites himself, and he has taught the creatures to be surprisingly fond of him and familiar with him. The cockatoo, a most vicious and treacherous bird towards every one else, absolutely seems to love him. When he lets it out of its cage, it hops on to his knee, and claws its way up his great big body, and rubs its top-knot against his sallow double chin in the most caressing manner imaginable. He has only to set the doors of the canaries' cages open, and to call them, and the pretty little cleverly trained creatures perch fearlessly on his hand, mount his fat outstretched fingers one by one, when he tells them to "go upstairs," and sing together as if they would burst their throats with delight when they get to the top finger. His white mice live in a little pagoda of gaily-painted wirework, designed and made by himself. They are almost as tame as the canaries, and they are perpetually let out like the canaries. They crawl all over him, popping in and out of his waistcoat, and sitting in couples, white as snow, on his capacious shoulders. He seems to be even fonder of his mice than of his other pets, smiles at them, and kisses them, and calls them by all sorts of endearing names. If it be possible to suppose an Englishman with any taste for such childish interests and amusements as these, that Englishman would certainly feel rather ashamed of them, and would be anxious to apologise for them, in the company of grown-up people. But the Count, apparently, sees nothing ridiculous in the amazing contrast between his colossal self and his frail little pets. He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary-birds amid an assembly of English fox-hunters, and would only pity them as barbarians when they were all laughing their loudest at him.

It seems hardly credible while I am writing it down, but it is certainly true, that this same man, who has all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo, and all the small dexterities of an organ-boy in managing his white mice, can talk, when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilised world. This trainer of canary-birds, this architect of a pagoda for white mice, is (as Sir Percival himself has told me) one of the first experimental chemists living, and has discovered, among other wonderful inventions, a means of petrifying the body after death, so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time. This fat, indolent, elderly man, whose nerves are so finely strung that he starts at chance noises, and winces when he sees a house-spaniel get a whipping, went into the stable-yard on the morning after his arrival, and put

his hand on the head of a chained bloodhound--a beast so savage that the very groom who feeds him keeps out of his reach. His wife and I were present, and I shall not forget the scene that followed, short as it was.

"Mind that dog, sir," said the groom; "he flies at everybody!" "He does that, my friend," replied the Count quietly, "because everybody is afraid of him. Let us see if he flies at me." And he laid his plump, yellow-white fingers, on which the canary-birds had been perching ten minutes before, upon the formidable brute's head, and looked him straight in the eyes. "You big dogs are all cowards," he said, addressing the animal contemptuously, with his face and the dog's within an inch of each other. "You would kill a poor cat, you infernal coward. You would fly at a starving beggar, you infernal coward. Anything that you can surprise unawares--anything that is afraid of your big body, and your wicked white teeth, and your slobbering, bloodthirsty mouth, is the thing you like to fly at. You could throttle me at this moment, you mean, miserable bully, and you daren't so much as look me in the face, because I'm not afraid of you. Will you think better of it, and try your teeth in my fat neck? Bah! not you!" He turned away, laughing at the astonishment of the men in the yard, and the dog crept back meekly to his kennel. "Ah! my nice waistcoat!" he said pathetically. "I am sorry I came here. Some of that brute's slobber has got on my pretty clean waistcoat." Those words express another of his incomprehensible oddities. He is as fond of fine clothes as the veriest fool in existence, and has appeared in four magnificent waistcoats already--all of light garish colours, and all immensely large even for him--in the two days of his residence at Blackwater Park.

His tact and cleverness in small things are quite as noticeable as the singular inconsistencies in his character, and the childish triviality of his ordinary tastes and pursuits.

I can see already that he means to live on excellent terms with all of us during the period of his sojourn in this place. He has evidently discovered that Laura secretly dislikes him (she confessed as much to me when I pressed her on the subject)--but he has also found out that she is extravagantly fond of flowers. Whenever she wants a nosegay he has got one to give her, gathered and arranged by himself, and greatly to my amusement, he is always cunningly provided with a duplicate, composed of exactly the same flowers, grouped in exactly the same way, to appease his icily jealous wife before she can so much as think herself aggrieved. His management of the Countess (in public) is a sight to see. He bows to her, he habitually addresses her as "my angel," he carries his canaries to pay her little visits on his fingers and to sing to her, he kisses her hand when she gives him his cigarettes; he presents her with sugar-plums in return, which

he puts into her mouth playfully, from a box in his pocket. The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company--it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs.

His method of recommending himself to me is entirely different. He flatters my vanity by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man. Yes! I can find him out when I am away from him--I know he flatters my vanity, when I think of him up here in my own room--and yet, when I go downstairs, and get into his company again, he will blind me again, and I shall be flattered again, just as if I had never found him out at all! He can manage me as he manages his wife and Laura, as he managed the bloodhound in the stable-yard, as he manages Sir Percival himself, every hour in the day. "My good Percival! how I like your rough English humour!"--"My good Percival! how I enjoy your solid English sense!" He puts the rudest remarks Sir Percival can make on his effeminate tastes and amusements quietly away from him in that manner--always calling the baronet by his Christian name, smiling at him with the calmest superiority, patting him on the shoulder, and bearing with him benignantly, as a good-humoured father bears with a wayward son.

The interest which I really cannot help feeling in this strangely original man has led me to question Sir Percival about his past life.

Sir Percival either knows little, or will tell me little, about it. He and the Count first met many years ago, at Rome, under the dangerous circumstances to which I have alluded elsewhere. Since that time they have been perpetually together in London, in Paris, and in Vienna--but never in Italy again; the Count having, oddly enough, not crossed the frontiers of his native country for years past. Perhaps he has been made the victim of some political persecution? At all events, he seems to be patriotically anxious not to lose sight of any of his own countrymen who may happen to be in England. On the evening of his arrival he asked how far we were from the nearest town, and whether we knew of any Italian gentlemen who might happen to be settled there. He is certainly in correspondence with people on the Continent, for his letters have all sorts of odd stamps on them, and I saw one for him this morning, waiting in his place at the breakfast-table, with a huge, official-looking seal on it. Perhaps he is in correspondence with his government? And yet, that is hardly to be reconciled either with my other idea that he may be a political exile.

How much I seem to have written about Count Fosco! And what does it all amount to?--as poor, dear Mr. Gilmore would ask, in his impenetrable business-like way I can only repeat that I do assuredly feel, even on this

short acquaintance, a strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for the Count. He seems to have established over me the same sort of ascendency which he has evidently gained over Sir Percival. Free, and even rude, as he may occasionally be in his manner towards his fat friend, Sir Percival is nevertheless afraid, as I can plainly see, of giving any serious offence to the Count. I wonder whether I am afraid too? I certainly never saw a man, in all my experience, whom I should be so sorry to have for an enemy. Is this because I like him, or because I am afraid of him? Chi sa?--as Count Fosco might say in his own language. Who knows?

June 16th.--Something to chronicle to-day besides my own ideas and impressions. A visitor has arrived--quite unknown to Laura and to me, and apparently quite unexpected by Sir Percival.

We were all at lunch, in the room with the new French windows that open into the verandah, and the Count (who devours pastry as I have never yet seen it devoured by any human beings but girls at boarding-schools) had just amused us by asking gravely for his fourth tart--when the servant entered to announce the visitor.

"Mr. Merriman has just come, Sir Percival, and wishes to see you immediately."

Sir Percival started, and looked at the man with an expression of angry alarm.

"Mr. Merriman!" he repeated, as if he thought his own ears must have deceived him.

"Yes, Sir Percival--Mr. Merriman, from London."

"Where is he?"

"In the library, Sir Percival."

He left the table the instant the last answer was given, and hurried out of the room without saying a word to any of us.

"Who is Mr. Merriman?" asked Laura, appealing to me.

"I have not the least idea," was all I could say in reply.

The Count had finished his fourth tart, and had gone to a side-table to look

after his vicious cockatoo. He turned round to us with the bird perched on his shoulder.

"Mr. Merriman is Sir Percival's solicitor," he said quietly.

Sir Percival's solicitor. It was a perfectly straightforward answer to Laura's question, and yet, under the circumstances, it was not satisfactory. If Mr. Merriman had been specially sent for by his client, there would have been nothing very wonderful in his leaving town to obey the summons. But when a lawyer travels from London to Hampshire without being sent for, and when his arrival at a gentleman's house seriously startles the gentleman himself, it may be safely taken for granted that the legal visitor is the bearer of some very important and very unexpected news--news which may be either very good or very bad, but which cannot, in either case, be of the common everyday kind.

Laura and I sat silent at the table for a quarter of an hour or more, wondering uneasily what had happened, and waiting for the chance of Sir Percival's speedy return. There were no signs of his return, and we rose to leave the room.

The Count, attentive as usual, advanced from the corner in which he had been feeding his cockatoo, with the bird still perched on his shoulder, and opened the door for us. Laura and Madame Fosco went out first. Just as I was on the point of following them he made a sign with his hand, and spoke to me, before I passed him, in the oddest manner.

"Yes," he said, quietly answering the unexpressed idea at that moment in my mind, as if I had plainly confided it to him in so many words--"yes, Miss Halcombe, something HAS happened."

I was on the point of answering, "I never said so," but the vicious cockatoo ruffled his clipped wings and gave a screech that set all my nerves on edge in an instant, and made me only too glad to get out of the room.

I joined Laura at the foot of the stairs. The thought in her mind was the same as the thought in mine, which Count Fosco had surprised, and when she spoke her words were almost the echo of his. She, too, said to me secretly that she was afraid something had happened.

III

June 16th.--I have a few lines more to add to this day's entry before I go to bed to-night.

About two hours after Sir Percival rose from the luncheon-table to receive his solicitor, Mr. Merriman, in the library, I left my room alone to take a walk in the plantations. Just as I was at the end of the landing the library door opened and the two gentlemen came out. Thinking it best not to disturb them by appearing on the stairs, I resolved to defer going down till they had crossed the hall. Although they spoke to each other in guarded tones, their words were pronounced with sufficient distinctness of utterance to reach my ears.

"Make your mind easy, Sir Percival," I heard the lawyer say; "it all rests with Lady Glyde."

I had turned to go back to my own room for a minute or two, but the sound of Laura's name on the lips of a stranger stopped me instantly. I daresay it was very wrong and very discreditable to listen, but where is the woman, in the whole range of our sex, who can regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those principles point one way, and when her affections, and the interests which grow out of them, point the other?

I listened--and under similar circumstances I would listen again--yes! with my ear at the keyhole, if I could not possibly manage it in any other way.

"You quite understand, Sir Percival," the lawyer went on. "Lady Glyde is to sign her name in the presence of a witness--or of two witnesses, if you wish to be particularly careful--and is then to put her finger on the seal and say, 'I deliver this as my act and deed.' If that is done in a week's time the arrangement will be perfectly successful, and the anxiety will be all over. If not----"

"What do you mean by 'if not'?" asked Sir Percival angrily. "If the thing must be done it SHALL be done. I promise you that, Merriman."

"Just so, Sir Percival--just so; but there are two alternatives in all transactions, and we lawyers like to look both of them in the face boldly. If through any extraordinary circumstance the arrangement should not be made, I think I may be able to get the parties to accept bills at three months.

But how the money is to be raised when the bills fall due----"

"Damn the bills! The money is only to be got in one way, and in that way, I tell you again, it SHALL be got. Take a glass of wine, Merriman, before you go."

"Much obliged, Sir Percival, I have not a moment to lose if I am to catch the up-train. You will let me know as soon as the arrangement is complete? and you will not forget the caution I recommended----"

"Of course I won't. There's the dog-cart at the door for you. My groom will get you to the station in no time. Benjamin, drive like mad! Jump in. If Mr. Merriman misses the train you lose your place. Hold fast, Merriman, and if you are upset trust to the devil to save his own." With that parting benediction the baronet turned about and walked back to the library.

I had not heard much, but the little that had reached my ears was enough to make me feel uneasy. The "something" that "had happened" was but too plainly a serious money embarrassment, and Sir Percival's relief from it depended upon Laura. The prospect of seeing her involved in her husband's secret difficulties filled me with dismay, exaggerated, no doubt, by my ignorance of business and my settled distrust of Sir Percival. Instead of going out, as I proposed, I went back immediately to Laura's room to tell her what I had heard.

She received my bad news so composedly as to surprise me. She evidently knows more of her husband's character and her husband's embarrassments than I have suspected up to this time.

"I feared as much," she said, "when I heard of that strange gentleman who called, and declined to leave his name."

"Who do you think the gentleman was, then?" I asked.

"Some person who has heavy claims on Sir Percival," she answered, "and who has been the cause of Mr. Merriman's visit here to-day."

"Do you know anything about those claims?"

"No, I know no particulars."

"You will sign nothing, Laura, without first looking at it?"

"Certainly not, Marian. Whatever I can harmlessly and honestly do to help him I will do--for the sake of making your life and mine, love, as easy and as happy as possible. But I will do nothing ignorantly, which we might, one day, have reason to feel ashamed of. Let us say no more about it now. You have got your hat on--suppose we go and dream away the afternoon in the grounds?"

On leaving the house we directed our steps to the nearest shade.

As we passed an open space among the trees in front of the house, there was Count Fosco, slowly walking backwards and forwards on the grass, sunning himself in the full blaze of the hot June afternoon. He had a broad straw hat on, with a violet-coloured ribbon round it. A blue blouse, with profuse white fancy-work over the bosom, covered his prodigious body, and was girt about the place where his waist might once have been with a broad scarlet leather belt. Nankeen trousers, displaying more white fancy-work over the ankles, and purple morocco slippers, adorned his lower extremities. He was singing Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville, with that crisply fluent vocalisation which is never heard from any other than an Italian throat, accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms, and graceful twistings and turnings of his head, like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire. "Figaro qua! Figaro la! Figaro su! Figaro giu!" sang the Count, jauntily tossing up the concertina at arm's length, and bowing to us, on one side of the instrument, with the airy grace and elegance of Figaro himself at twenty years of age.

"Take my word for it, Laura, that man knows something of Sir Percival's embarrassments," I said, as we returned the Count's salutation from a safe distance.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

"How should he have known, otherwise, that Mr. Merriman was Sir Percival's solicitor?" I rejoined. "Besides, when I followed you out of the luncheon-room, he told me, without a single word of inquiry on my part, that something had happened. Depend upon it, he knows more than we do."

"Don't ask him any questions if he does. Don't take him into our confidence!"

"You seem to dislike him, Laura, in a very determined manner. What has he said or done to justify you?"

"Nothing, Marian. On the contrary, he was all kindness and attention on our journey home, and he several times checked Sir Percival's outbreaks of temper, in the most considerate manner towards me. Perhaps I dislike him because he has so much more power over my husband than I have. Perhaps it hurts my pride to be under any obligations to his interference. All I know is, that I DO dislike him."

The rest of the day and evening passed quietly enough. The Count and I played at chess. For the first two games he politely allowed me to conquer him, and then, when he saw that I had found him out, begged my pardon, and at the third game checkmated me in ten minutes. Sir Percival never once referred, all through the evening, to the lawyer's visit. But either that event, or something else, had produced a singular alteration for the better in him. He was as polite and agreeable to all of us, as he used to be in the days of his probation at Limmeridge, and he was so amazingly attentive and kind to his wife, that even icy Madame Fosco was roused into looking at him with a grave surprise. What does this mean? I think I can guess--I am afraid Laura can guess--and I am sure Count Fosco knows. I caught Sir Percival looking at him for approval more than once in the course of the evening.

June 17th.--A day of events. I most fervently hope I may not have to add, a day of disasters as well.

Sir Percival was as silent at breakfast as he had been the evening before, on the subject of the mysterious "arrangement" (as the lawyer called it) which is hanging over our heads. An hour afterwards, however, he suddenly entered the morning-room, where his wife and I were waiting, with our hats on, for Madame Fosco to join us, and inquired for the Count.

"We expect to see him here directly," I said.

"The fact is," Sir Percival went on, walking nervously about the room, "I want Fosco and his wife in the library, for a mere business formality, and I want you there, Laura, for a minute too." He stopped, and appeared to notice, for the first time, that we were in our walking costume. "Have you just come in?" he asked, "or were you just going out?"

"We were all thinking of going to the lake this morning," said Laura. "But if you have any other arrangement to propose----"

"No, no," he answered hastily. "My arrangement can wait. After lunch will

do as well for it as after breakfast. All going to the lake, eh? A good idea. Let's have an idle morning--I'll be one of the party."

There was no mistaking his manner, even if it had been possible to mistake the uncharacteristic readiness which his words expressed, to submit his own plans and projects to the convenience of others. He was evidently relieved at finding any excuse for delaying the business formality in the library, to which his own words had referred. My heart sank within me as I drew the inevitable inference.

The Count and his wife joined us at that moment. The lady had her husband's embroidered tobacco-pouch, and her store of paper in her hand, for the manufacture of the eternal cigarettes. The gentleman, dressed, as usual, in his blouse and straw hat, carried the gay little pagoda-cage, with his darling white mice in it, and smiled on them, and on us, with a bland amiability which it was impossible to resist.

"With your kind permission," said the Count, "I will take my small family here--my poor-little-harmless-pretty-Mouseys, out for an airing along with us. There are dogs about the house, and shall I leave my forlorn white children at the mercies of the dogs? Ah, never!"

He chirruped paternally at his small white children through the bars of the pagoda, and we all left the house for the lake.

In the plantation Sir Percival strayed away from us. It seems to be part of his restless disposition always to separate himself from his companions on these occasions, and always to occupy himself when he is alone in cutting new walking-sticks for his own use. The mere act of cutting and lopping at hazard appears to please him. He has filled the house with walking-sticks of his own making, not one of which he ever takes up for a second time. When they have been once used his interest in them is all exhausted, and he thinks of nothing but going on and making more.

At the old boat-house he joined us again. I will put down the conversation that ensued when we were all settled in our places exactly as it passed. It is an important conversation, so far as I am concerned, for it has seriously disposed me to distrust the influence which Count Fosco has exercised over my thoughts and feelings, and to resist it for the future as resolutely as I can.

The boat-house was large enough to hold us all, but Sir Percival remained outside trimming the last new stick with his pocket-axe. We three women

found plenty of room on the large seat. Laura took her work, and Madame Fosco began her cigarettes. I, as usual, had nothing to do. My hands always were, and always will be, as awkward as a man's. The Count good-humouredly took a stool many sizes too small for him, and balanced himself on it with his back against the side of the shed, which creaked and groaned under his weight. He put the pagoda-cage on his lap, and let out the mice to crawl over him as usual. They are pretty, innocent-looking little creatures, but the sight of them creeping about a man's body is for some reason not pleasant to me. It excites a strange responsive creeping in my own nerves, and suggests hideous ideas of men dying in prison with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed.

The morning was windy and cloudy, and the rapid alternations of shadow and sunlight over the waste of the lake made the view look doubly wild, weird, and gloomy.

"Some people call that picturesque," said Sir Percival, pointing over the wide prospect with his half-finished walking-stick. "I call it a blot on a gentleman's property. In my great-grandfather's time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now! It is not four feet deep anywhere, and it is all puddles and pools. I wish I could afford to drain it, and plant it all over. My bailiff (a superstitious idiot) says he is quite sure the lake has a curse on it, like the Dead Sea. What do you think, Fosco? It looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?"

"My good Percival," remonstrated the Count. "What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body, and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer's footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on."

"Humbug!" said Sir Percival, cutting away fiercely at his stick. "You know what I mean. The dreary scenery, the lonely situation. If you choose to understand me, you can--if you don't choose, I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning."

"And why not," asked the Count, "when your meaning can be explained by anybody in two words? If a fool was going to commit a murder, your lake is the first place he would choose for it. If a wise man was going to commit a murder, your lake is the last place he would choose for it. Is that your meaning? If it is, there is your explanation for you ready made. Take it, Percival, with your good Fosco's blessing."

Laura looked at the Count with her dislike for him appearing a little too

plainly in her face. He was so busy with his mice that he did not notice her.

"I am sorry to hear the lake-view connected with anything so horrible as the idea of murder," she said. "And if Count Fosco must divide murderers into classes, I think he has been very unfortunate in his choice of expressions. To describe them as fools only seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim. And to describe them as wise men sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men, and have a horror of crime."

"My dear lady," said the Count, "those are admirable sentiments, and I have seen them stated at the tops of copy-books." He lifted one of the white mice in the palm of his hand, and spoke to it in his whimsical way. "My pretty little smooth white rascal," he said, "here is a moral lesson for you. A truly wise mouse is a truly good mouse. Mention that, if you please, to your companions, and never gnaw at the bars of your cage again as long as you live."

"It is easy to turn everything into ridicule," said Laura resolutely; "but you will not find it quite so easy, Count Fosco, to give me an instance of a wise man who has been a great criminal."

The Count shrugged his huge shoulders, and smiled on Laura in the friendliest manner.

"Most true!" he said. "The fool's crime is the crime that is found out, and the wise man's crime is the crime that is NOT found out. If I could give you an instance, it would not be the instance of a wise man. Dear Lady Glyde, your sound English common sense has been too much for me. It is checkmate for me this time, Miss Halcombe--ha?"

"Stand to your guns, Laura," sneered Sir Percival, who had been listening in his place at the door. "Tell him next, that crimes cause their own detection. There's another bit of copy-book morality for you, Fosco. Crimes cause their own detection. What infernal humbug!"

"I believe it to be true," said Laura quietly.

Sir Percival burst out laughing, so violently, so outrageously, that he quite startled us all--the Count more than any of us.

"I believe it too," I said, coming to Laura's rescue.

Sir Percival, who had been unaccountably amused at his wife's remark, was just as unaccountably irritated by mine. He struck the new stick savagely on the sand, and walked away from us.

"Poor dear Percival!" cried Count Fosco, looking after him gaily, "he is the victim of English spleen. But, my dear Miss Halcombe, my dear Lady Glyde, do you really believe that crimes cause their own detection? And you, my angel," he continued, turning to his wife, who had not uttered a word yet, "do you think so too?"

"I wait to be instructed," replied the Countess, in tones of freezing reproof, intended for Laura and me, "before I venture on giving my opinion in the presence of well-informed men."

"Do you, indeed?" I said. "I remember the time, Countess, when you advocated the Rights of Women, and freedom of female opinion was one of them."

"What is your view of the subject, Count?" asked Madame Fosco, calmly proceeding with her cigarettes, and not taking the least notice of me.

The Count stroked one of his white mice reflectively with his chubby little finger before he answered.

"It is truly wonderful," he said, "how easily Society can console itself for the worst of its shortcomings with a little bit of clap-trap. The machinery it has set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective--and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders from that moment. Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? Ask Coroners who sit at inquests in large towns if that is true, Lady Glyde. Ask secretaries of life-assurance companies if that is true, Miss Halcombe. Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers, are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are NOT reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are NOT found, and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape. The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police in nine cases out of ten win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police in nine cases out of ten lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you

generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes--all the crime you know of. And what of the rest?"

"Devilish true, and very well put," cried a voice at the entrance of the boat-house. Sir Percival had recovered his equanimity, and had come back while we were listening to the Count.

"Some of it may be true," I said, "and all of it may be very well put. But I don't see why Count Fosco should celebrate the victory of the criminal over Society with so much exultation, or why you, Sir Percival, should applaud him so loudly for doing it."

"Do you hear that, Fosco?" asked Sir Percival. "Take my advice, and make your peace with your audience. Tell them virtue's a fine thing--they like that, I can promise you."

The Count laughed inwardly and silently, and two of the white mice in his waistcoat, alarmed by the internal convulsion going on beneath them, darted out in a violent hurry, and scrambled into their cage again.

"The ladies, my good Percival, shall tell me about virtue," he said. "They are better authorities than I am, for they know what virtue is, and I don't."

"You hear him?" said Sir Percival. "Isn't it awful?"

"It is true," said the Count quietly. "I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong. Here, in England, there is one virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue. And John Englishman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And John Chinaman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And I say Yes to one, or No to the other, and am just as much bewildered about it in the case of John with the top-boots as I am in the case of John with the pigtail. Ah, nice little Mousey! come, kiss me. What is your own private notion of a virtuous man, my pret-pret-pretty? A man who keeps you warm, and gives you plenty to eat. And a good notion, too, for it is intelligible, at the least."

"Stay a minute, Count," I interposed. "Accepting your illustration, surely we have one unquestionable virtue in England which is wanting in China. The Chinese authorities kill thousands of innocent people on the most frivolous pretexts. We in England are free from all guilt of that kind--we commit no such dreadful crime--we abhor reckless bloodshed with all our hearts."

"Quite right, Marian," said Laura. "Well thought of, and well expressed."

"Pray allow the Count to proceed," said Madame Fosco, with stern civility. "You will find, young ladies, that HE never speaks without having excellent reasons for all that he says."

"Thank you, my angel," replied the Count. "Have a bon-bon?" He took out of his pocket a pretty little inlaid box, and placed it open on the table. "Chocolat a la Vanille," cried the impenetrable man, cheerfully rattling the sweetmeats in the box, and bowing all round. "Offered by Fosco as an act of homage to the charming society."

"Be good enough to go on, Count," said his wife, with a spiteful reference to myself. "Oblige me by answering Miss Halcombe."

"Miss Halcombe is unanswerable," replied the polite Italian; "that is to say, so far as she goes. Yes! I agree with her. John Bull does abhor the crimes of John Chinaman. He is the quickest old gentleman at finding out faults that are his neighbours', and the slowest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his own, who exists on the face of creation. Is he so very much better in this way than the people whom he condemns in their way? English Society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime. Yes! yes! Crime is in this country what crime is in other countries--a good friend to a man and to those about him as often as it is an enemy. A great rascal provides for his wife and family. The worse he is the more he makes them the objects for your sympathy. He often provides also for himself. A profligate spendthrift who is always borrowing money will get more from his friends than the rigidly honest man who only borrows of them once, under pressure of the direst want. In the one case the friends will not be at all surprised, and they will give. In the other case they will be very much surprised, and they will hesitate. Is the prison that Mr. Scoundrel lives in at the end of his career a more uncomfortable place than the workhouse that Mr. Honesty lives in at the end of his career? When John-Howard-Philanthropist wants to relieve misery he goes to find it in prisons, where crime is wretched--not in huts and hovels, where virtue is wretched too. Who is the English poet who has won the most universal sympathy--who makes the easiest of all subjects for pathetic writing and pathetic painting? That nice young person who began life with a forgery, and ended it by a suicide--your dear, romantic, interesting Chatterton. Which gets on best, do you think, of two poor starving dressmakers--the woman who resists temptation and is honest, or the woman who falls under temptation and steals? You all know that the stealing is the making of that second

woman's fortune--it advertises her from length to breadth of good-humoured, charitable England--and she is relieved, as the breaker of a commandment, when she would have been left to starve, as the keeper of it. Come here, my jolly little Mouse! Hey! presto! pass! I transform you, for the time being, into a respectable lady. Stop there, in the palm of my great big hand, my dear, and listen. You marry the poor man whom you love, Mouse, and one half your friends pity, and the other half blame you. And now, on the contrary, you sell yourself for gold to a man you don't care for, and all your friends rejoice over you, and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains, and smiles and smirks afterwards at your table, if you are polite enough to ask him to breakfast. Hey! presto! pass! Be a mouse again, and squeak. If you continue to be a lady much longer, I shall have you telling me that Society abhors crime--and then, Mouse, I shall doubt if your own eyes and ears are really of any use to you. Ah! I am a bad man, Lady Glyde, am I not? I say what other people only think, and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath. I will get up on my big elephant's legs, before I do myself any more harm in your amiable estimations--I will get up and take a little airy walk of my own. Dear ladies, as your excellent Sheridan said, I go--and leave my character behind me."

He got up, put the cage on the table, and paused for a moment to count the mice in it. "One, two, three, four----Ha!" he cried, with a look of horror, "where, in the name of Heaven, is the fifth--the youngest, the whitest, the most amiable of all--my Benjamin of mice!"

Neither Laura nor I were in any favorable disposition to be amused. The Count's glib cynicism had revealed a new aspect of his nature from which we both recoiled. But it was impossible to resist the comical distress of so very large a man at the loss of so very small a mouse. We laughed in spite of ourselves; and when Madame Fosco rose to set the example of leaving the boat-house empty, so that her husband might search it to its remotest corners, we rose also to follow her out.

Before we had taken three steps, the Count's quick eye discovered the lost mouse under the seat that we had been occupying. He pulled aside the bench, took the little animal up in his hand, and then suddenly stopped, on his knees, looking intently at a particular place on the ground just beneath him.

When he rose to his feet again, his hand shook so that he could hardly put the mouse back in the cage, and his face was of a faint livid yellow hue all

over.

"Percival!" he said, in a whisper. "Percival! come here."

Sir Percival had paid no attention to any of us for the last ten minutes. He had been entirely absorbed in writing figures on the sand, and then rubbing them out again with the point of his stick.

"What's the matter now?" he asked, lounging carelessly into the boat-house.

"Do you see nothing there?" said the Count, catching him nervously by the collar with one hand, and pointing with the other to the place near which he had found the mouse.

"I see plenty of dry sand," answered Sir Percival, "and a spot of dirt in the middle of it."

"Not dirt," whispered the Count, fastening the other hand suddenly on Sir Percival's collar, and shaking it in his agitation. "Blood."

Laura was near enough to hear the last word, softly as he whispered it. She turned to me with a look of terror.

"Nonsense, my dear," I said. "There is no need to be alarmed. It is only the blood of a poor little stray dog."

Everybody was astonished, and everybody's eyes were fixed on me inquiringly.

"How do you know that?" asked Sir Percival, speaking first.

"I found the dog here, dying, on the day when you all returned from abroad," I replied. "The poor creature had strayed into the plantation, and had been shot by your keeper."

"Whose dog was it?" inquired Sir Percival. "Not one of mine?"

"Did you try to save the poor thing?" asked Laura earnestly. "Surely you tried to save it, Marian?"

"Yes," I said, "the housekeeper and I both did our best--but the dog was mortally wounded, and he died under our hands."

"Whose dog was it?" persisted Sir Percival, repeating his question a little irritably. "One of mine?"

"No, not one of yours."

"Whose then? Did the housekeeper know?"

The housekeeper's report of Mrs. Catherick's desire to conceal her visit to Blackwater Park from Sir Percival's knowledge recurred to my memory the moment he put that last question, and I half doubted the discretion of answering it; but in my anxiety to quiet the general alarm, I had thoughtlessly advanced too far to draw back, except at the risk of exciting suspicion, which might only make matters worse. There was nothing for it but to answer at once, without reference to results.

"Yes," I said. "The housekeeper knew. She told me it was Mrs. Catherick's dog."

Sir Percival had hitherto remained at the inner end of the boat-house with Count Fosco, while I spoke to him from the door. But the instant Mrs. Catherick's name passed my lips he pushed by the Count roughly, and placed himself face to face with me under the open daylight.

"How came the housekeeper to know it was Mrs. Catherick's dog?" he asked, fixing his eyes on mine with a frowning interest and attention, which half angered, half startled me.

"She knew it," I said quietly, "because Mrs. Catherick brought the dog with her."

"Brought it with her? Where did she bring it with her?"

"To this house."

"What the devil did Mrs. Catherick want at this house?"

The manner in which he put the question was even more offensive than the language in which he expressed it. I marked my sense of his want of common politeness by silently turning away from him.

Just as I moved the Count's persuasive hand was laid on his shoulder, and the Count's mellifluous voice interposed to quiet him.

"My dear Percival!--gently--gently!"

Sir Percival looked round in his angriest manner. The Count only smiled and repeated the soothing application.

"Gently, my good friend--gently!"

Sir Percival hesitated, followed me a few steps, and, to my great surprise, offered me an apology.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe," he said. "I have been out of order lately, and I am afraid I am a little irritable. But I should like to know what Mrs. Catherick could possibly want here. When did she come? Was the housekeeper the only person who saw her?"

"The only person," I answered, "so far as I know."

The Count interposed again.

"In that case why not question the housekeeper?" he said. "Why not go, Percival, to the fountain-head of information at once?"

"Quite right!" said Sir Percival. "Of course the housekeeper is the first person to question. Excessively stupid of me not to see it myself." With those words he instantly left us to return to the house.

The motive of the Count's interference, which had puzzled me at first, betrayed itself when Sir Percival's back was turned. He had a host of questions to put to me about Mrs. Catherick, and the cause of her visit to Blackwater Park, which he could scarcely have asked in his friend's presence. I made my answers as short as I civilly could, for I had already determined to check the least approach to any exchanging of confidences between Count Fosco and myself. Laura, however, unconsciously helped him to extract all my information, by making inquiries herself, which left me no alternative but to reply to her, or to appear in the very unenviable and very false character of a depositary of Sir Percival's secrets. The end of it was, that, in about ten minutes' time, the Count knew as much as I know of Mrs. Catherick, and of the events which have so strangely connected us with her daughter, Anne, from the time when Hartright met with her to this day.

The effect of my information on him was, in one respect, curious enough.

Intimately as he knows Sir Percival, and closely as he appears to be

associated with Sir Percival's private affairs in general, he is certainly as far as I am from knowing anything of the true story of Anne Catherick. The unsolved mystery in connection with this unhappy woman is now rendered doubly suspicious, in my eyes, by the absolute conviction which I feel, that the clue to it has been hidden by Sir Percival from the most intimate friend he has in the world. It was impossible to mistake the eager curiosity of the Count's look and manner while he drank in greedily every word that fell from my lips. There are many kinds of curiosity, I know--but there is no misinterpreting the curiosity of blank surprise: if I ever saw it in my life I saw it in the Count's face.

While the questions and answers were going on, we had all been strolling quietly back through the plantation. As soon as we reached the house the first object that we saw in front of it was Sir Percival's dog-cart, with the horse put to and the groom waiting by it in his stable-jacket. If these unexpected appearances were to be trusted, the examination of the house-keeper had produced important results already.

"A fine horse, my friend," said the Count, addressing the groom with the most engaging familiarity of manner, "You are going to drive out?"

"I am not going, sir," replied the man, looking at his stable-jacket, and evidently wondering whether the foreign gentleman took it for his livery. "My master drives himself."

"Aha!" said the Count, "does he indeed? I wonder he gives himself the trouble when he has got you to drive for him. Is he going to fatigue that nice, shining, pretty horse by taking him very far to-day?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the man. "The horse is a mare, if you please, sir. She's the highest-couraged thing we've got in the stables. Her name's Brown Molly, sir, and she'll go till she drops. Sir Percival usually takes Isaac of York for the short distances."

"And your shining courageous Brown Molly for the long?"

"Logical inference, Miss Halcombe," continued the Count, wheeling round briskly, and addressing me. "Sir Percival is going a long distance to-day."

I made no reply. I had my own inferences to draw, from what I knew through the housekeeper and from what I saw before me, and I did not choose to share them with Count Fosco.

When Sir Percival was in Cumberland (I thought to myself), he walked away a long distance, on Anne's account, to question the family at Todd's Corner. Now he is in Hampshire, is he going to drive away a long distance, on Anne's account again, to question Mrs. Catherick at Welmingham?

We all entered the house. As we crossed the hall Sir Percival came out from the library to meet us. He looked hurried and pale and anxious--but for all that, he was in his most polite mood when he spoke to us.

"I am sorry to say I am obliged to leave you," he began--"a long drive--a matter that I can't very well put off. I shall be back in good time to-morrow--but before I go I should like that little business-formality, which I spoke of this morning, to be settled. Laura, will you come into the library? It won't take a minute--a mere formality. Countess, may I trouble you also? I want you and the Countess, Fosco, to be witnesses to a signature--nothing more. Come in at once and get it over."

He held the library door open until they had passed in, followed them, and shut it softly.

I remained, for a moment afterwards, standing alone in the hall, with my heart beating fast and my mind misgiving me sadly. Then I went on to the staircase, and ascended slowly to my own room.

IV

June 17th.--Just as my hand was on the door of my room, I heard Sir Percival's voice calling to me from below.

"I must beg you to come downstairs again," he said. "It is Fosco's fault, Miss Halcombe, not mine. He has started some nonsensical objection to his wife being one of the witnesses, and has obliged me to ask you to join us in the library."

I entered the room immediately with Sir Percival. Laura was waiting by the writing-table, twisting and turning her garden hat uneasily in her hands. Madame Fosco sat near her, in an arm-chair, imperturbably admiring her husband, who stood by himself at the other end of the library, picking off the dead leaves from the flowers in the window.

The moment I appeared the Count advanced to meet me, and to offer his explanations.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Halcombe," he said. "You know the character which is given to my countrymen by the English? We Italians are all wily and suspicious by nature, in the estimation of the good John Bull. Set me down, if you please, as being no better than the rest of my race. I am a wily Italian and a suspicious Italian. You have thought so yourself, dear lady, have you not? Well! it is part of my wiliness and part of my suspicion to object to Madame Fosco being a witness to Lady Glyde's signature, when I am also a witness myself."

"There is not the shadow of a reason for his objection," interposed Sir Percival. "I have explained to him that the law of England allows Madame Fosco to witness a signature as well as her husband."

"I admit it," resumed the Count. "The law of England says, Yes, but the conscience of Fosco says, No." He spread out his fat fingers on the bosom of his blouse, and bowed solemnly, as if he wished to introduce his conscience to us all, in the character of an illustrious addition to the society. "What this document which Lady Glyde is about to sign may be," he continued, "I neither know nor desire to know. I only say this, circumstances may happen in the future which may oblige Percival, or his representatives, to appeal to the two witnesses, in which case it is certainly desirable that those witnesses should represent two opinions which are perfectly independent

the one of the other. This cannot be if my wife signs as well as myself, because we have but one opinion between us, and that opinion is mine. I will not have it cast in my teeth, at some future day, that Madame Fosco acted under my coercion, and was, in plain fact, no witness at all. I speak in Percival's interest, when I propose that my name shall appear (as the nearest friend of the husband), and your name, Miss Halcombe (as the nearest friend of the wife). I am a Jesuit, if you please to think so--a splitter of straws--a man of trifles and crochets and scruples--but you will humour me, I hope, in merciful consideration for my suspicious Italian character, and my uneasy Italian conscience." He bowed again, stepped back a few paces, and withdrew his conscience from our society as politely as he had introduced it.

The Count's scruples might have been honourable and reasonable enough, but there was something in his manner of expressing them which increased my unwillingness to be concerned in the business of the signature. No consideration of less importance than my consideration for Laura would have induced me to consent to be a witness at all. One look, however, at her anxious face decided me to risk anything rather than desert her.

"I will readily remain in the room," I said. "And if I find no reason for starting any small scruples on my side, you may rely on me as a witness."

Sir Percival looked at me sharply, as if he was about to say something. But at the same moment, Madame Fosco attracted his attention by rising from her chair. She had caught her husband's eye, and had evidently received her orders to leave the room.

"You needn't go," said Sir Percival.

Madame Fosco looked for her orders again, got them again, said she would prefer leaving us to our business, and resolutely walked out. The Count lit a cigarette, went back to the flowers in the window, and puffed little jets of smoke at the leaves, in a state of the deepest anxiety about killing the insects.

Meanwhile Sir Percival unlocked a cupboard beneath one of the book-cases, and produced from it a piece of parchment, folded longwise, many times over. He placed it on the table, opened the last fold only, and kept his hand on the rest. The last fold displayed a strip of blank parchment with little wafers stuck on it at certain places. Every line of the writing was hidden in the part which he still held folded up under his hand. Laura and I looked at each other. Her face was pale, but it showed no indecision and no fear.

Sir Percival dipped a pen in ink, and handed it to his wife. "Sign your name there," he said, pointing to the place. "You and Fosco are to sign afterwards, Miss Halcombe, opposite those two wafers. Come here, Fosco! witnessing a signature is not to be done by mooning out of window and smoking into the flowers."

The Count threw away his cigarette, and joined us at the table, with his hands carelessly thrust into the scarlet belt of his blouse, and his eyes steadily fixed on Sir Percival's face. Laura, who was on the other side of her husband, with the pen in her hand, looked at him too. He stood between them holding the folded parchment down firmly on the table, and glancing across at me, as I sat opposite to him, with such a sinister mixture of suspicion and embarrassment on his face that he looked more like a prisoner at the bar than a gentleman in his own house.

"Sign there," he repeated, turning suddenly on Laura, and pointing once more to the place on the parchment.

"What is it I am to sign?" she asked quietly.

"I have no time to explain," he answered. "The dog-cart is at the door, and I must go directly. Besides, if I had time, you wouldn't understand. It is a purely formal document, full of legal technicalities, and all that sort of thing. Come! come! sign your name, and let us have done as soon as possible."

"I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?"

"Nonsense! What have women to do with business? I tell you again, you can't understand it."

"At any rate, let me try to understand it. Whenever Mr. Gilmore had any business for me to do, he always explained it first, and I always understood him."

"I dare say he did. He was your servant, and was obliged to explain. I am your husband, and am NOT obliged. How much longer do you mean to keep me here? I tell you again, there is no time for reading anything--the dog-cart is waiting at the door. Once for all, will you sign or will you not?"

She still had the pen in her hand, but she made no approach to signing her name with it.

"If my signature pledges me to anything," she said, "surely I have some claim to know what that pledge is?"

He lifted up the parchment, and struck it angrily on the table.

"Speak out!" he said. "You were always famous for telling the truth. Never mind Miss Halcombe, never mind Fosco--say, in plain terms, you distrust me."

The Count took one of his hands out of his belt and laid it on Sir Percival's shoulder. Sir Percival shook it off irritably. The Count put it on again with unruffled composure.

"Control your unfortunate temper, Percival," he said "Lady Glyde is right."

"Right!" cried Sir Percival. "A wife right in distrusting her husband!"

"It is unjust and cruel to accuse me of distrusting you," said Laura. "Ask Marian if I am not justified in wanting to know what this writing requires of me before I sign it."

"I won't have any appeals made to Miss Halcombe," retorted Sir Percival. "Miss Halcombe has nothing to do with the matter."

I had not spoken hitherto, and I would much rather not have spoken now. But the expression of distress in Laura's face when she turned it towards me, and the insolent injustice of her husband's conduct, left me no other alternative than to give my opinion, for her sake, as soon as I was asked for it.

"Excuse me, Sir Percival," I said--"but as one of the witnesses to the signature, I venture to think that I HAVE something to do with the matter. Laura's objection seems to me a perfectly fair one, and speaking for myself only, I cannot assume the responsibility of witnessing her signature, unless she first understands what the writing is which you wish her to sign."

"A cool declaration, upon my soul!" cried Sir Percival. "The next time you invite yourself to a man's house, Miss Halcombe, I recommend you not to repay his hospitality by taking his wife's side against him in a matter that doesn't concern you."

I started to my feet as suddenly as if he had struck me. If I had been a man,

I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, never on any earthly consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman--and I loved his wife so dearly!

Thank God, that faithful love helped me, and I sat down again without saying a word. SHE knew what I had suffered and what I had suppressed. She ran round to me, with the tears streaming from her eyes. "Oh, Marian!" she whispered softly. "If my mother had been alive, she could have done no more for me!"

"Come back and sign!" cried Sir Percival from the other side of the table.

"Shall I?" she asked in my ear; "I will, if you tell me."

"No," I answered. "The right and the truth are with you--sign nothing, unless you have read it first."

"Come back and sign!" he reiterated, in his loudest and angriest tones.

The Count, who had watched Laura and me with a close and silent attention, interposed for the second time.

"Percival!" he said. "I remember that I am in the presence of ladies. Be good enough, if you please, to remember it too."

Sir Percival turned on him speechless with passion. The Count's firm hand slowly tightened its grasp on his shoulder, and the Count's steady voice quietly repeated, "Be good enough, if you please, to remember it too."

They both looked at each other. Sir Percival slowly drew his shoulder from under the Count's hand, slowly turned his face away from the Count's eyes, doggedly looked down for a little while at the parchment on the table, and then spoke, with the sullen submission of a tamed animal, rather than the becoming resignation of a convinced man.

"I don't want to offend anybody," he said, "but my wife's obstinacy is enough to try the patience of a saint. I have told her this is merely a formal document--and what more can she want? You may say what you please, but it is no part of a woman's duty to set her husband at defiance. Once more, Lady Glyde, and for the last time, will you sign or will you not?"

Laura returned to his side of the table, and took up the pen again.

"I will sign with pleasure," she said, "if you will only treat me as a responsible being. I care little what sacrifice is required of me, if it will affect no one else, and lead to no ill results--"

"Who talked of a sacrifice being required of You?" he broke in, with a half-suppressed return of his former violence.

"I only meant," she resumed, "that I would refuse no concession which I could honourably make. If I have a scruple about signing my name to an engagement of which I know nothing, why should you visit it on me so severely? It is rather hard, I think, to treat Count Fosco's scruples so much more indulgently than you have treated mine."

This unfortunate, yet most natural, reference to the Count's extraordinary power over her husband, indirect as it was, set Sir Percival's smouldering temper on fire again in an instant.

"Scruples!" he repeated. "YOUR scruples! It is rather late in the day for you to be scrupulous. I should have thought you had got over all weakness of that sort, when you made a virtue of necessity by marrying me."

The instant he spoke those words, Laura threw down the pen--looked at him with an expression in her eyes which, throughout all my experience of her, I had never seen in them before, and turned her back on him in dead silence.

This strong expression of the most open and the most bitter contempt was so entirely unlike herself, so utterly out of her character, that it silenced us all. There was something hidden, beyond a doubt, under the mere surface-brutality of the words which her husband had just addressed to her. There was some lurking insult beneath them, of which I was wholly ignorant, but which had left the mark of its profanation so plainly on her face that even a stranger might have seen it.

The Count, who was no stranger, saw it as distinctly as I did. When I left my chair to join Laura, I heard him whisper under his breath to Sir Percival, "You idiot!"

Laura walked before me to the door as I advanced, and at the same time her husband spoke to her once more.

"You positively refuse, then, to give me your signature?" he said, in the altered tone of a man who was conscious that he had let his own licence of language seriously injure him.

"After what you have just said to me," she replied firmly, "I refuse my signature until I have read every line in that parchment from the first word to the last. Come away, Marian, we have remained here long enough."

"One moment!" interposed the Count before Sir Percival could speak again--"one moment, Lady Glyde, I implore you!"

Laura would have left the room without noticing him, but I stopped her.

"Don't make an enemy of the Count!" I whispered. "Whatever you do, don't make an enemy of the Count!"

She yielded to me. I closed the door again, and we stood near it waiting. Sir Percival sat down at the table, with his elbow on the folded parchment, and his head resting on his clenched fist. The Count stood between us--master of the dreadful position in which we were placed, as he was master of everything else.

"Lady Glyde," he said, with a gentleness which seemed to address itself to our forlorn situation instead of to ourselves, "pray pardon me if I venture to offer one suggestion, and pray believe that I speak out of my profound respect and my friendly regard for the mistress of this house." He turned sharply towards Sir Percival. "Is it absolutely necessary," he asked "that this thing here, under your elbow, should be signed to-day?"

"It is necessary to my plans and wishes," returned the other sulkily. "But that consideration, as you may have noticed, has no influence with Lady Glyde."

"Answer my plain question plainly. Can the business of the signature be put off till to-morrow--Yes or No?"

"Yes, if you will have it so."

"Then what are you wasting your time for here? Let the signature wait till to-morrow--let it wait till you come back."

Sir Percival looked up with a frown and an oath.

"You are taking a tone with me that I don't like," he said. "A tone I won't bear from any man."

"I am advising you for your good," returned the Count, with a smile of quiet contempt. "Give yourself time--give Lady Glyde time. Have you forgotten that your dog-cart is waiting at the door? My tone surprises you--ha? I dare say it does--it is the tone of a man who can keep his temper. How many doses of good advice have I given you in my time? More than you can count. Have I ever been wrong? I defy you to quote me an instance of it. Go! take your drive. The matter of the signature can wait till to-morrow. Let it wait--and renew it when you come back."

Sir Percival hesitated and looked at his watch. His anxiety about the secret journey which he was to take that day, revived by the Count's words, was now evidently disputing possession of his mind with his anxiety to obtain Laura's signature. He considered for a little while, and then got up from his chair.

"It is easy to argue me down," he said, "when I have no time to answer you. I will take your advice, Fosco--not because I want it, or believe in it, but because I can't stop here any longer." He paused, and looked round darkly at his wife. "If you don't give me your signature when I come back to-morrow!" The rest was lost in the noise of his opening the book-case cupboard again, and locking up the parchment once more. He took his hat and gloves off the table, and made for the door. Laura and I drew back to let him pass. "Remember to-morrow!" he said to his wife, and went out.

We waited to give him time to cross the hall and drive away. The Count approached us while we were standing near the door.

"You have just seen Percival at his worst, Miss Halcombe," he said. "As his old friend, I am sorry for him and ashamed of him. As his old friend, I promise you that he shall not break out to-morrow in the same disgraceful manner in which he has broken out to-day."

Laura had taken my arm while he was speaking and she pressed it significantly when he had done. It would have been a hard trial to any woman to stand by and see the office of apologist for her husband's misconduct quietly assumed by his male friend in her own house--and it was a trial to HER. I thanked the Count civilly, and let her out. Yes! I thanked him: for I felt already, with a sense of inexpressible helplessness and humiliation, that it was either his interest or his caprice to make sure of my continuing to reside at Blackwater Park, and I knew after Sir Percival's conduct to me, that without the support of the Count's influence, I could not hope to remain there. His influence, the influence of all others that I dreaded most, was actually the one tie which now held me to Laura in the

hour of her utmost need!

We heard the wheels of the dog-cart crashing on the gravel of the drive as we came into the hall. Sir Percival had started on his journey.

"Where is he going to, Marian?" Laura whispered. "Every fresh thing he does seems to terrify me about the future. Have you any suspicions?"

After what she had undergone that morning, I was unwilling to tell her my suspicions.

"How should I know his secrets?" I said evasively.

"I wonder if the housekeeper knows?" she persisted.

"Certainly not," I replied. "She must be quite as ignorant as we are."

Laura shook her head doubtfully.

"Did you not hear from the housekeeper that there was a report of Anne Catherick having been seen in this neighbourhood? Don't you think he may have gone away to look for her?"

"I would rather compose myself, Laura, by not thinking about it at all, and after what has happened, you had better follow my example. Come into my room, and rest and quiet yourself a little."

We sat down together close to the window, and let the fragrant summer air breathe over our faces.

"I am ashamed to look at you, Marian," she said, "after what you submitted to downstairs, for my sake. Oh, my own love, I am almost heartbroken when I think of it! But I will try to make it up to you--I will indeed!"

"Hush! hush!" I replied; "don't talk so. What is the trifling mortification of my pride compared to the dreadful sacrifice of your happiness?"

"You heard what he said to me?" she went on quickly and vehemently. "You heard the words--but you don't know what they meant--you don't know why I threw down the pen and turned my back on him." She rose in sudden agitation, and walked about the room. "I have kept many things from your knowledge, Marian, for fear of distressing you, and making you unhappy at the outset of our new lives. You don't know how he has used me. And yet

you ought to know, for you saw how he used me to-day. You heard him sneer at my presuming to be scrupulous--you heard him say I had made a virtue of necessity in marrying him." She sat down again, her face flushed deeply, and her hands twisted and twined together in her lap. "I can't tell you about it now," she said; "I shall burst out crying if I tell you now--later, Marian, when I am more sure of myself. My poor head aches, darling--aches, aches, aches. Where is your smelling-bottle? Let me talk to you about yourself. I wish I had given him my signature, for your sake. Shall I give it to him to-morrow? I would rather compromise myself than compromise you. After your taking my part against him, he will lay all the blame on you if I refuse again. What shall we do? Oh, for a friend to help us and advise us!--a friend we could really trust!"

She sighed bitterly. I saw in her face that she was thinking of Hartright--saw it the more plainly because her last words set me thinking of him too. In six months only from her marriage we wanted the faithful service he had offered to us in his farewell words. How little I once thought that we should ever want it at all!

"We must do what we can to help ourselves," I said. "Let us try to talk it over calmly, Laura--let us do all in our power to decide for the best."

Putting what she knew of her husband's embarrassments and what I had heard of his conversation with the lawyer together, we arrived necessarily at the conclusion that the parchment in the library had been drawn up for the purpose of borrowing money, and that Laura's signature was absolutely necessary to fit it for the attainment of Sir Percival's object.

The second question, concerning the nature of the legal contract by which the money was to be obtained, and the degree of personal responsibility to which Laura might subject herself if she signed it in the dark, involved considerations which lay far beyond any knowledge and experience that either of us possessed. My own convictions led me to believe that the hidden contents of the parchment concealed a transaction of the meanest and the most fraudulent kind.

I had not formed this conclusion in consequence of Sir Percival's refusal to show the writing or to explain it, for that refusal might well have proceeded from his obstinate disposition and his domineering temper alone. My sole motive for distrusting his honesty sprang from the change which I had observed in his language and his manners at Blackwater Park, a change which convinced me that he had been acting a part throughout the whole period of his probation at Limmeridge House. His elaborate delicacy, his

ceremonious politeness which harmonised so agreeably with Mr. Gilmore's old-fashioned notions, his modesty with Laura, his candour with me, his moderation with Mr. Fairlie--all these were the artifices of a mean, cunning, and brutal man, who had dropped his disguise when his practised duplicity had gained its end, and had openly shown himself in the library on that very day. I say nothing of the grief which this discovery caused me on Laura's account, for it is not to be expressed by any words of mine. I only refer to it at all, because it decided me to oppose her signing the parchment, whatever the consequences might be, unless she was first made acquainted with the contents.

Under these circumstances, the one chance for us when to-morrow came was to be provided with an objection to giving the signature, which might rest on sufficiently firm commercial or legal grounds to shake Sir Percival's resolution, and to make him suspect that we two women understood the laws and obligations of business as well as himself.

After some pondering, I determined to write to the only honest man within reach whom we could trust to help us discreetly in our forlorn situation. That man was Mr. Gilmore's partner, Mr. Kyrle, who conducted the business now that our old friend had been obliged to withdraw from it, and to leave London on account of his health. I explained to Laura that I had Mr. Gilmore's own authority for placing implicit confidence in his partner's integrity, discretion, and accurate knowledge of all her affairs, and with her full approval I sat down at once to write the letter, I began by stating our position to Mr. Kyrle exactly as it was, and then asked for his advice in return, expressed in plain, downright terms which he could comprehend without any danger of misinterpretations and mistakes. My letter was as short as I could possibly make it, and was, I hope, unencumbered by needless apologies and needless details.

Just as I was about to put the address on the envelope an obstacle was discovered by Laura, which in the effort and preoccupation of writing had escaped my mind altogether.

"How are we to get the answer in time?" she asked. "Your letter will not be delivered in London before to-morrow morning, and the post will not bring the reply here till the morning after."

The only way of overcoming this difficulty was to have the answer brought to us from the lawyer's office by a special messenger. I wrote a postscript to that effect, begging that the messenger might be despatched with the reply by the eleven o'clock morning train, which would bring him to our station at

twenty minutes past one, and so enable him to reach Blackwater Park by two o'clock at the latest. He was to be directed to ask for me, to answer no questions addressed to him by any one else, and to deliver his letter into no hands but mine.

"In case Sir Percival should come back to-morrow before two o'clock," I said to Laura, "the wisest plan for you to adopt is to be out in the grounds all the morning with your book or your work, and not to appear at the house till the messenger has had time to arrive with the letter. I will wait here for him all the morning, to guard against any misadventures or mistakes. By following this arrangement I hope and believe we shall avoid being taken by surprise. Let us go down to the drawing-room now. We may excite suspicion if we remain shut up together too long."

"Suspicion?" she repeated. "Whose suspicion can we excite, now that Sir Percival has left the house? Do you mean Count Fosco?"

"Perhaps I do, Laura."

"You are beginning to dislike him as much as I do, Marian."

"No, not to dislike him. Dislike is always more or less associated with contempt--I can see nothing in the Count to despise."

"You are not afraid of him, are you?"

"Perhaps I am--a little."

"Afraid of him, after his interference in our favour to-day!"

"Yes. I am more afraid of his interference than I am of Sir Percival's violence. Remember what I said to you in the library. Whatever you do, Laura, don't make an enemy of the Count!"

We went downstairs. Laura entered the drawing-room, while I proceeded across the hall, with my letter in my hand, to put it into the post-bag, which hung against the wall opposite to me.

The house door was open, and as I crossed past it, I saw Count Fosco and his wife standing talking together on the steps outside, with their faces turned towards me.

The Countess came into the hall rather hastily, and asked if I had leisure

enough for five minutes' private conversation. Feeling a little surprised by such an appeal from such a person, I put my letter into the bag, and replied that I was quite at her disposal. She took my arm with unaccustomed friendliness and familiarity, and instead of leading me into an empty room, drew me out with her to the belt of turf which surrounded the large fish-pond.

As we passed the Count on the steps he bowed and smiled, and then went at once into the house, pushing the hall door to after him, but not actually closing it.

The Countess walked me gently round the fish-pond. I expected to be made the depositary of some extraordinary confidence, and I was astonished to find that Madame Fosco's communication for my private ear was nothing more than a polite assurance of her sympathy for me, after what had happened in the library. Her husband had told her of all that had passed, and of the insolent manner in which Sir Percival had spoken to me. This information had so shocked and distressed her, on my account and on Laura's, that she had made up her mind, if anything of the sort happened again, to mark her sense of Sir Percival's outrageous conduct by leaving the house. The Count had approved of her idea, and she now hoped that I approved of it too.

I thought this a very strange proceeding on the part of such a remarkably reserved woman as Madame Fosco, especially after the interchange of sharp speeches which had passed between us during the conversation in the boat-house on that very morning. However, it was my plain duty to meet a polite and friendly advance on the part of one of my elders with a polite and friendly reply. I answered the Countess accordingly in her own tone, and then, thinking we had said all that was necessary on either side, made an attempt to get back to the house.

But Madame Fosco seemed resolved not to part with me, and to my unspeakable amazement, resolved also to talk. Hitherto the most silent of women, she now persecuted me with fluent conventionalities on the subject of married life, on the subject of Sir Percival and Laura, on the subject of her own happiness, on the subject of the late Mr. Fairlie's conduct to her in the matter of her legacy, and on half a dozen other subjects besides, until she had detained me walking round and round the fish-pond for more than half an hour, and had quite wearied me out. Whether she discovered this or not, I cannot say, but she stopped as abruptly as she had begun--looked towards the house door, resumed her icy manner in a moment, and dropped my arm of her own accord before I could think of an excuse for accomplishing my

own release from her.

As I pushed open the door and entered the hall, I found myself suddenly face to face with the Count again. He was just putting a letter into the post-bag.

After he had dropped it in and had closed the bag, he asked me where I had left Madame Fosco. I told him, and he went out at the hall door immediately to join his wife. His manner when he spoke to me was so unusually quiet and subdued that I turned and looked after him, wondering if he were ill or out of spirits.

Why my next proceeding was to go straight up to the post-bag and take out my own letter and look at it again, with a vague distrust on me, and why the looking at it for the second time instantly suggested the idea to my mind of sealing the envelope for its greater security--are mysteries which are either too deep or too shallow for me to fathom. Women, as everybody knows, constantly act on impulses which they cannot explain even to themselves, and I can only suppose that one of those impulses was the hidden cause of my unaccountable conduct on this occasion.

Whatever influence animated me, I found cause to congratulate myself on having obeyed it as soon as I prepared to seal the letter in my own room. I had originally closed the envelope in the usual way by moistening the adhesive point and pressing it on the paper beneath, and when I now tried it with my finger, after a lapse of full three-quarters of an hour, the envelope opened on the instant, without sticking or tearing. Perhaps I had fastened it insufficiently? Perhaps there might have been some defect in the adhesive gum?

Or, perhaps----No! it is quite revolting enough to feel that third conjecture stirring in my mind. I would rather not see it confronting me in plain black and white.

I almost dread to-morrow--so much depends on my discretion and self-control. There are two precautions, at all events, which I am sure not to forget. I must be careful to keep up friendly appearances with the Count, and I must be well on my guard when the messenger from the office comes here with the answer to my letter.

V

June 17th.--When the dinner hour brought us together again, Count Fosco was in his usual excellent spirits. He exerted himself to interest and amuse us, as if he was determined to efface from our memories all recollection of what had passed in the library that afternoon. Lively descriptions of his adventures in travelling, amusing anecdotes of remarkable people whom he had met with abroad, quaint comparisons between the social customs of various nations, illustrated by examples drawn from men and women indiscriminately all over Europe, humorous confessions of the innocent follies of his own early life, when he ruled the fashions of a second-rate Italian town, and wrote preposterous romances on the French model for a second-rate Italian newspaper--all flowed in succession so easily and so gaily from his lips, and all addressed our various curiosities and various interests so directly and so delicately, that Laura and I listened to him with as much attention and, inconsistent as it may seem, with as much admiration also, as Madame Fosco herself. Women can resist a man's love, a man's fame, a man's personal appearance, and a man's money, but they cannot resist a man's tongue when he knows how to talk to them.

After dinner, while the favourable impression which he had produced on us was still vivid in our minds, the Count modestly withdrew to read in the library.

Laura proposed a stroll in the grounds to enjoy the close of the long evening. It was necessary in common politeness to ask Madame Fosco to join us, but this time she had apparently received her orders beforehand, and she begged we would kindly excuse her. "The Count will probably want a fresh supply of cigarettes," she remarked by way of apology, "and nobody can make them to his satisfaction but myself." Her cold blue eyes almost warmed as she spoke the words--she looked actually proud of being the officiating medium through which her lord and master composed himself with tobacco-smoke!

Laura and I went out together alone.

It was a misty, heavy evening. There was a sense of blight in the air; the flowers were drooping in the garden, and the ground was parched and dewless. The western heaven, as we saw it over the quiet trees, was of a pale yellow hue, and the sun was setting faintly in a haze. Coming rain seemed near--it would fall probably with the fall of night.

"Which way shall we go?" I asked

"Towards the lake, Marian, if you like," she answered.

"You seem unaccountably fond, Laura, of that dismal lake."

"No, not of the lake but of the scenery about it. The sand and heath and the fir-trees are the only objects I can discover, in all this large place, to remind me of Limmeridge. But we will walk in some other direction if you prefer it."

"I have no favourite walks at Blackwater Park, my love. One is the same as another to me. Let us go to the lake--we may find it cooler in the open space than we find it here."

We walked through the shadowy plantation in silence. The heaviness in the evening air oppressed us both, and when we reached the boat-house we were glad to sit down and rest inside.

A white fog hung low over the lake. The dense brown line of the trees on the opposite bank appeared above it, like a dwarf forest floating in the sky. The sandy ground, shelving downward from where we sat, was lost mysteriously in the outward layers of the fog. The silence was horrible. No rustling of the leaves--no bird's note in the wood--no cry of water-fowl from the pools of the hidden lake. Even the croaking of the frogs had ceased to-night.

"It is very desolate and gloomy," said Laura. "But we can be more alone here than anywhere else."

She spoke quietly and looked at the wilderness of sand and mist with steady, thoughtful eyes. I could see that her mind was too much occupied to feel the dreary impressions from without which had fastened themselves already on mine.

"I promised, Marian, to tell you the truth about my married life, instead of leaving you any longer to guess it for yourself," she began. "That secret is the first I have ever had from you, love, and I am determined it shall be the last. I was silent, as you know, for your sake--and perhaps a little for my own sake as well. It is very hard for a woman to confess that the man to whom she has given her whole life is the man of all others who cares least for the gift. If you were married yourself, Marian--and especially if you were happily married--you would feel for me as no single woman CAN feel, however kind and true she may be."

What answer could I make? I could only take her hand and look at her with my whole heart as well as my eyes would let me.

"How often," she went on, "I have heard you laughing over what you used to call your 'poverty!' how often you have made me mock-speeches of congratulation on my wealth! Oh, Marian, never laugh again. Thank God for your poverty--it has made you your own mistress, and has saved you from the lot that has fallen on ME."

A sad beginning on the lips of a young wife!--sad in its quiet plain-spoken truth. The few days we had all passed together at Blackwater Park had been many enough to show me--to show any one--what her husband had married her for.

"You shall not be distressed," she said, "by hearing how soon my disappointments and my trials began--or even by knowing what they were. It is bad enough to have them on my memory. If I tell you how he received the first and last attempt at remonstrance that I ever made, you will know how he has always treated me, as well as if I had described it in so many words. It was one day at Rome when we had ridden out together to the tomb of Cecilia Metella. The sky was calm and lovely, and the grand old ruin looked beautiful, and the remembrance that a husband's love had raised it in the old time to a wife's memory, made me feel more tenderly and more anxiously towards my husband than I had ever felt yet. 'Would you build such a tomb for ME, Percival?' I asked him. 'You said you loved me dearly before we were married, and yet, since that time----' I could get no farther. Marian! he was not even looking at me! I pulled down my veil, thinking it best not to let him see that the tears were in my eyes. I fancied he had not paid any attention to me, but he had. He said, 'Come away,' and laughed to himself as he helped me on to my horse. He mounted his own horse and laughed again as we rode away. 'If I do build you a tomb,' he said, 'it will be done with your own money. I wonder whether Cecilia Metella had a fortune and paid for hers.' I made no reply--how could I, when I was crying behind my veil? 'Ah, you light-complexioned women are all sulky,' he said. 'What do you want? compliments and soft speeches? Well! I'm in a good humour this morning. Consider the compliments paid and the speeches said.' Men little know when they say hard things to us how well we remember them, and how much harm they do us. It would have been better for me if I had gone on crying, but his contempt dried up my tears and hardened my heart. From that time, Marian, I never checked myself again in thinking of Walter Hartright. I let the memory of those happy days, when we were so fond of each other in secret, come back and comfort me. What else had I to look to

for consolation? If we had been together you would have helped me to better things. I know it was wrong, darling, but tell me if I was wrong without any excuse."

I was obliged to turn my face from her. "Don't ask me!" I said. "Have I suffered as you have suffered? What right have I to decide?"

"I used to think of him," she pursued, dropping her voice and moving closer to me, "I used to think of him when Percival left me alone at night to go among the Opera people. I used to fancy what I might have been if it had pleased God to bless me with poverty, and if I had been his wife. I used to see myself in my neat cheap gown, sitting at home and waiting for him while he was earning our bread--sitting at home and working for him and loving him all the better because I had to work for him--seeing him come in tired and taking off his hat and coat for him, and, Marian, pleasing him with little dishes at dinner that I had learnt to make for his sake. Oh! I hope he is never lonely enough and sad enough to think of me and see me as I have thought of HIM and see HIM!"

As she said those melancholy words, all the lost tenderness returned to her voice, and all the lost beauty trembled back into her face. Her eyes rested as lovingly on the blighted, solitary, ill-omened view before us, as if they saw the friendly hills of Cumberland in the dim and threatening sky.

"Don't speak of Walter any more," I said, as soon as I could control myself. "Oh, Laura, spare us both the wretchedness of talking of him now!"

She roused herself, and looked at me tenderly.

"I would rather be silent about him for ever," she answered, "than cause you a moment's pain."

"It is in your interests," I pleaded; "it is for your sake that I speak. If your husband heard you----"

"It would not surprise him if he did hear me."

She made that strange reply with a weary calmness and coldness. The change in her manner, when she gave the answer, startled me almost as much as the answer itself.

"Not surprise him!" I repeated. "Laura! remember what you are saying--you frighten me!"

"It is true," she said; "it is what I wanted to tell you to-day, when we were talking in your room. My only secret when I opened my heart to him at Limmeridge was a harmless secret, Marian--you said so yourself. The name was all I kept from him, and he has discovered it."

I heard her, but I could say nothing. Her last words had killed the little hope that still lived in me.

"It happened at Rome," she went on, as wearily calm and cold as ever. "We were at a little party given to the English by some friends of Sir Percival's--Mr. and Mrs. Markland. Mrs. Markland had the reputation of sketching very beautifully, and some of the guests prevailed on her to show us her drawings. We all admired them, but something I said attracted her attention particularly to me. 'Surely you draw yourself?' she asked. 'I used to draw a little once,' I answered, 'but I have given it up.' 'If you have once drawn,' she said, 'you may take to it again one of these days, and if you do, I wish you would let me recommend you a master.' I said nothing--you know why, Marian--and tried to change the conversation. But Mrs. Markland persisted. 'I have had all sorts of teachers,' she went on, 'but the best of all, the most intelligent and the most attentive, was a Mr. Hartright. If you ever take up your drawing again, do try him as a master. He is a young man--modest and gentlemanlike--I am sure you will like him. 'Think of those words being spoken to me publicly, in the presence of strangers--strangers who had been invited to meet the bride and bridegroom! I did all I could to control myself--I said nothing, and looked down close at the drawings. When I ventured to raise my head again, my eyes and my husband's eyes met, and I knew, by his look, that my face had betrayed me. 'We will see about Mr. Hartright,' he said, looking at me all the time, 'when we get back to England. I agree with you, Mrs. Markland--I think Lady Glyde is sure to like him.' He laid an emphasis on the last words which made my cheeks burn, and set my heart beating as if it would stifle me. Nothing more was said. We came away early. He was silent in the carriage driving back to the hotel. He helped me out, and followed me upstairs as usual. But the moment we were in the drawing-room, he locked the door, pushed me down into a chair, and stood over me with his hands on my shoulders. 'Ever since that morning when you made your audacious confession to me at Limmeridge,' he said, 'I have wanted to find out the man, and I found him in your face to-night. Your drawing-master was the man, and his name is Hartright. You shall repent it, and he shall repent it, to the last hour of your lives. Now go to bed and dream of him if you like, with the marks of my horsewhip on his shoulders.' Whenever he is angry with me now he refers to what I acknowledged to him in your presence with a sneer or a threat. I

have no power to prevent him from putting his own horrible construction on the confidence I placed in him. I have no influence to make him believe me, or to keep him silent. You looked surprised to-day when you heard him tell me that I had made a virtue of necessity in marrying him. You will not be surprised again when you hear him repeat it, the next time he is out of temper----Oh, Marian! don't! don't! you hurt me!"

I had caught her in my arms, and the sting and torment of my remorse had closed them round her like a vice. Yes! my remorse. The white despair of Walter's face, when my cruel words struck him to the heart in the summer-house at Limmeridge, rose before me in mute, unendurable reproach. My hand had pointed the way which led the man my sister loved, step by step, far from his country and his friends. Between those two young hearts I had stood, to sunder them for ever, the one from the other, and his life and her life lay wasted before me alike in witness of the deed. I had done this, and done it for Sir Percival Glyde.

For Sir Percival Glyde.

I heard her speaking, and I knew by the tone of her voice that she was comforting me--I, who deserved nothing but the reproach of her silence! How long it was before I mastered the absorbing misery of my own thoughts, I cannot tell. I was first conscious that she was kissing me, and then my eyes seemed to wake on a sudden to their sense of outward things, and I knew that I was looking mechanically straight before me at the prospect of the lake.

"It is late," I heard her whisper. "It will be dark in the plantation." She shook my arm and repeated, "Marian! it will be dark in the plantation."

"Give me a minute longer," I said--"a minute, to get better in."

I was afraid to trust myself to look at her yet, and I kept my eyes fixed on the view.

It WAS late. The dense brown line of trees in the sky had faded in the gathering darkness to the faint resemblance of a long wreath of smoke. The mist over the lake below had stealthily enlarged, and advanced on us. The silence was as breathless as ever, but the horror of it had gone, and the solemn mystery of its stillness was all that remained.

"We are far from the house," she whispered. "Let us go back."

She stopped suddenly, and turned her face from me towards the entrance of the boat-house.

"Marian!" she said, trembling violently. "Do you see nothing? Look!"

"Where?"

"Down there, below us."

She pointed. My eyes followed her hand, and I saw it too.

A living figure was moving over the waste of heath in the distance. It crossed our range of view from the boat-house, and passed darkly along the outer edge of the mist. It stopped far off, in front of us--waited--and passed on; moving slowly, with the white cloud of mist behind it and above it--slowly, slowly, till it glided by the edge of the boat-house, and we saw it no more.

We were both unnerved by what had passed between us that evening. Some minutes elapsed before Laura would venture into the plantation, and before I could make up my mind to lead her back to the house.

"Was it a man or a woman?" she asked in a whisper, as we moved at last into the dark dampness of the outer air.

"I am not certain."

"Which do you think?"

"It looked like a woman."

"I was afraid it was a man in a long cloak."

"It may be a man. In this dim light it is not possible to be certain."

"Wait, Marian! I'm frightened--I don't see the path. Suppose the figure should follow us?"

"Not at all likely, Laura. There is really nothing to be alarmed about. The shores of the lake are not far from the village, and they are free to any one to walk on by day or night. It is only wonderful we have seen no living creature there before."

We were now in the plantation. It was very dark--so dark, that we found some difficulty in keeping the path. I gave Laura my arm, and we walked as fast as we could on our way back.

Before we were half-way through she stopped, and forced me to stop with her. She was listening.

"Hush," she whispered. "I hear something behind us."

"Dead leaves," I said to cheer her, "or a twig blown off the trees."

"It is summer time, Marian, and there is not a breath of wind. Listen!"

I heard the sound too--a sound like a light footstep following us.

"No matter who it is, or what it is," I said, "let us walk on. In another minute, if there is anything to alarm us, we shall be near enough to the house to be heard."

We went on quickly--so quickly, that Laura was breathless by the time we were nearly through the plantation, and within sight of the lighted windows.

I waited a moment to give her breathing-time. Just as we were about to proceed she stopped me again, and signed to me with her hand to listen once more. We both heard distinctly a long, heavy sigh behind us, in the black depths of the trees.

"Who's there?" I called out.

There was no answer.

"Who's there?" I repeated.

An instant of silence followed, and then we heard the light fall of the footsteps again, fainter and fainter--sinking away into the darkness--sinking, sinking, sinking--till they were lost in the silence.

We hurried out from the trees to the open lawn beyond crossed it rapidly; and without another word passing between us, reached the house.

In the light of the hall-lamp Laura looked at me, with white cheeks and startled eyes.

"I am half dead with fear," she said. "Who could it have been?"

"We will try to guess to-morrow," I replied. "In the meantime say nothing to any one of what we have heard and seen."

"Why not?"

"Because silence is safe, and we have need of safety in this house."

I sent Laura upstairs immediately, waited a minute to take off my hat and put my hair smooth, and then went at once to make my first investigations in the library, on pretence of searching for a book.

There sat the Count, filling out the largest easy-chair in the house, smoking and reading calmly, with his feet on an ottoman, his cravat across his knees, and his shirt collar wide open. And there sat Madame Fosco, like a quiet child, on a stool by his side, making cigarettes. Neither husband nor wife could, by any possibility, have been out late that evening, and have just got back to the house in a hurry. I felt that my object in visiting the library was answered the moment I set eyes on them.

Count Fosco rose in polite confusion and tied his cravat on when I entered the room.

"Pray don't let me disturb you," I said. "I have only come here to get a book."

"All unfortunate men of my size suffer from the heat," said the Count, refreshing himself gravely with a large green fan. "I wish I could change places with my excellent wife. She is as cool at this moment as a fish in the pond outside."

The Countess allowed herself to thaw under the influence of her husband's quaint comparison. "I am never warm, Miss Halcombe," she remarked, with the modest air of a woman who was confessing to one of her own merits.

"Have you and Lady Glyde been out this evening?" asked the Count, while I was taking a book from the shelves to preserve appearances.

"Yes, we went out to get a little air."

"May I ask in what direction?"

"In the direction of the lake--as far as the boat-house."

"Aha? As far as the boat-house?"

Under other circumstances I might have resented his curiosity. But to-night I hailed it as another proof that neither he nor his wife were connected with the mysterious appearance at the lake.

"No more adventures, I suppose, this evening?" he went on. "No more discoveries, like your discovery of the wounded dog?"

He fixed his unfathomable grey eyes on me, with that cold, clear, irresistible glitter in them which always forces me to look at him, and always makes me uneasy while I do look. An unutterable suspicion that his mind is prying into mine overcomes me at these times, and it overcame me now.

"No," I said shortly; "no adventures--no discoveries."

I tried to look away from him and leave the room. Strange as it seems, I hardly think I should have succeeded in the attempt if Madame Fosco had not helped me by causing him to move and look away first.

"Count, you are keeping Miss Halcombe standing," she said.

The moment he turned round to get me a chair, I seized my opportunity--thanked him--made my excuses--and slipped out.

An hour later, when Laura's maid happened to be in her mistress's room, I took occasion to refer to the closeness of the night, with a view to ascertaining next how the servants had been passing their time.

"Have you been suffering much from the heat downstairs?" I asked.

"No, miss," said the girl, "we have not felt it to speak of."

"You have been out in the woods then, I suppose?"

"Some of us thought of going, miss. But cook said she should take her chair into the cool court-yard, outside the kitchen door, and on second thoughts, all the rest of us took our chairs out there too."

The housekeeper was now the only person who remained to be accounted for.

"Is Mrs. Michelson gone to bed yet?" I inquired.

"I should think not, miss," said the girl, smiling. "Mrs. Michelson is more likely to be getting up just now than going to bed."

"Why? What do you mean? Has Mrs. Michelson been taking to her bed in the daytime?"

"No, miss, not exactly, but the next thing to it. She's been asleep all the evening on the sofa in her own room."

Putting together what I observed for myself in the library, and what I have just heard from Laura's maid, one conclusion seems inevitable. The figure we saw at the lake was not the figure of Madame Fosco, of her husband, or of any of the servants. The footsteps we heard behind us were not the footsteps of any one belonging to the house.

Who could it have been?

It seems useless to inquire. I cannot even decide whether the figure was a man's or a woman's. I can only say that I think it was a woman's.

VI

June 18th.--The misery of self-reproach which I suffered yesterday evening, on hearing what Laura told me in the boat-house, returned in the loneliness of the night, and kept me waking and wretched for hours.

I lighted my candle at last, and searched through my old journals to see what my share in the fatal error of her marriage had really been, and what I might have once done to save her from it. The result soothed me a little for it showed that, however blindly and ignorantly I acted, I acted for the best. Crying generally does me harm; but it was not so last night--I think it relieved me. I rose this morning with a settled resolution and a quiet mind. Nothing Sir Percival can say or do shall ever irritate me again, or make me forget for one moment that I am staying here in defiance of mortifications, insults, and threats, for Laura's service and for Laura's sake.

The speculations in which we might have indulged this morning, on the subject of the figure at the lake and the footsteps in the plantation, have been all suspended by a trifling accident which has caused Laura great regret. She has lost the little brooch I gave her for a keepsake on the day before her marriage. As she wore it when we went out yesterday evening we can only suppose that it must have dropped from her dress, either in the boat-house or on our way back. The servants have been sent to search, and have returned unsuccessful. And now Laura herself has gone to look for it. Whether she finds it or not the loss will help to excuse her absence from the house, if Sir Percival returns before the letter from Mr. Gilmore's partner is placed in my hands.

One o'clock has just struck. I am considering whether I had better wait here for the arrival of the messenger from London, or slip away quietly, and watch for him outside the lodge gate.

My suspicion of everybody and everything in this house inclines me to think that the second plan may be the best. The Count is safe in the breakfast-room. I heard him, through the door, as I ran upstairs ten minutes since, exercising his canary-birds at their tricks:--"Come out on my little finger, my pret-pret-pretties! Come out, and hop upstairs! One, two, three--and up! Three, two, one--and down! One, two, three--twit-twit-twit-tweet!" The birds burst into their usual ecstasy of singing, and the Count chirruped and whistled at them in return, as if he was a bird himself. My room door is open, and I can hear the shrill singing and whistling at this very moment. If

I am really to slip out without being observed, now is my time.

FOUR O'CLOCK. The three hours that have passed since I made my last entry have turned the whole march of events at Blackwater Park in a new direction. Whether for good or for evil, I cannot and dare not decide.

Let me get back first to the place at which I left off, or I shall lose myself in the confusion of my own thoughts.

I went out, as I had proposed, to meet the messenger with my letter from London at the lodge gate. On the stairs I saw no one. In the hall I heard the Count still exercising his birds. But on crossing the quadrangle outside, I passed Madame Fosco, walking by herself in her favourite circle, round and round the great fish-pond. I at once slackened my pace, so as to avoid all appearance of being in a hurry, and even went the length, for caution's sake, of inquiring if she thought of going out before lunch. She smiled at me in the friendliest manner--said she preferred remaining near the house, nodded pleasantly, and re-entered the hall. I looked back, and saw that she had closed the door before I had opened the wicket by the side of the carriage gates.

In less than a quarter of an hour I reached the lodge.

The lane outside took a sudden turn to the left, ran on straight for a hundred yards or so, and then took another sharp turn to the right to join the high-road. Between these two turns, hidden from the lodge on one side, and from the way to the station on the other, I waited, walking backwards and forwards. High hedges were on either side of me, and for twenty minutes, by my watch, I neither saw nor heard anything. At the end of that time the sound of a carriage caught my ear, and I was met, as I advanced towards the second turning, by a fly from the railway. I made a sign to the driver to stop. As he obeyed me a respectable-looking man put his head out of the window to see what was the matter.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but am I right in supposing that you are going to Blackwater Park?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"With a letter for any one?"

"With a letter for Miss Halcombe, ma'am."

"You may give me the letter. I am Miss Halcombe."

The man touched his hat, got out of the fly immediately, and gave me the letter.

I opened it at once and read these lines. I copy them here, thinking it best to destroy the original for caution's sake.

"DEAR MADAM,--Your letter received this morning has caused me very great anxiety. I will reply to it as briefly and plainly as possible.

"My careful consideration of the statement made by yourself, and my knowledge of Lady Glyde's position, as defined in the settlement, lead me, I regret to say, to the conclusion that a loan of the trust money to Sir Percival (or, in other words, a loan of some portion of the twenty thousand pounds of Lady Glyde's fortune) is in contemplation, and that she is made a party to the deed, in order to secure her approval of a flagrant breach of trust, and to have her signature produced against her if she should complain hereafter. It is impossible, on any other supposition, to account, situated as she is, for her execution to a deed of any kind being wanted at all.

"In the event of Lady Glyde's signing such a document, as I am compelled to suppose the deed in question to be, her trustees would be at liberty to advance money to Sir Percival out of her twenty thousand pounds. If the amount so lent should not be paid back, and if Lady Glyde should have children, their fortune will then be diminished by the sum, large or small, so advanced. In plainer terms still, the transaction, for anything that Lady Glyde knows to the contrary, may be a fraud upon her unborn children.

"Under these serious circumstances, I would recommend Lady Glyde to assign as a reason for withholding her signature, that she wishes the deed to be first submitted to myself, as her family solicitor (in the absence of my partner, Mr. Gilmore). No reasonable objection can be made to taking this course--for, if the transaction is an honourable one, there will necessarily be no difficulty in my giving my approval.

"Sincerely assuring you of my readiness to afford any additional help or advice that may be wanted, I beg to remain, Madam, your faithful servant,

"WILLIAM KYRLE."

I read this kind and sensible letter very thankfully. It supplied Laura with a reason for objecting to the signature which was unanswerable, and which we could both of us understand. The messenger waited near me while I was reading to receive his directions when I had done.

"Will you be good enough to say that I understand the letter, and that I am very much obliged?" I said. "There is no other reply necessary at present."

Exactly at the moment when I was speaking those words, holding the letter open in my hand, Count Fosco turned the corner of the lane from the high-road, and stood before me as if he had sprung up out of the earth.

The suddenness of his appearance, in the very last place under heaven in which I should have expected to see him, took me completely by surprise. The messenger wished me good-morning, and got into the fly again. I could not say a word to him--I was not even able to return his bow. The conviction that I was discovered--and by that man, of all others--absolutely petrified me.

"Are you going back to the house, Miss Halcombe?" he inquired, without showing the least surprise on his side, and without even looking after the fly, which drove off while he was speaking to me.

I collected myself sufficiently to make a sign in the affirmative.

"I am going back too," he said. "Pray allow me the pleasure of accompanying you. Will you take my arm? You look surprised at seeing me!"

I took his arm. The first of my scattered senses that came back was the sense that warned me to sacrifice anything rather than make an enemy of him.

"You look surprised at seeing me!" he repeated in his quietly pertinacious way.

"I thought, Count, I heard you with your birds in the breakfast-room," I answered, as quietly and firmly as I could.

"Surely. But my little feathered children, dear lady, are only too like other children. They have their days of perversity, and this morning was one of them. My wife came in as I was putting them back in their cage, and said she had left you going out alone for a walk. You told her so, did you not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Miss Halcombe, the pleasure of accompanying you was too great a temptation for me to resist. At my age there is no harm in confessing so much as that, is there? I seized my hat, and set off to offer myself as your escort. Even so fat an old man as Fosco is surely better than no escort at all? I took the wrong path--I came back in despair, and here I am, arrived (may I say it?) at the height of my wishes."

He talked on in this complimentary strain with a fluency which left me no exertion to make beyond the effort of maintaining my composure. He never referred in the most distant manner to what he had seen in the lane, or to the letter which I still had in my hand. This ominous discretion helped to convince me that he must have surprised, by the most dishonourable means, the secret of my application in Laura's interest to the lawyer; and that, having now assured himself of the private manner in which I had received the answer, he had discovered enough to suit his purposes, and was only bent on trying to quiet the suspicions which he knew he must have aroused in my mind. I was wise enough, under these circumstances, not to attempt to deceive him by plausible explanations, and woman enough, notwithstanding my dread of him, to feel as if my hand was tainted by resting on his arm.

On the drive in front of the house we met the dog-cart being taken round to the stables. Sir Percival had just returned. He came out to meet us at the house-door. Whatever other results his journey might have had, it had not ended in softening his savage temper.

"Oh! here are two of you come back," he said, with a lowering face. "What is the meaning of the house being deserted in this way? Where is Lady Glyde?"

I told him of the loss of the brooch, and said that Laura had gone into the plantation to look for it.

"Brooch or no brooch," he growled sulkily, "I recommend her not to forget her appointment in the library this afternoon. I shall expect to see her in half an hour."

I took my hand from the Count's arm, and slowly ascended the steps. He honoured me with one of his magnificent bows, and then addressed himself gaily to the scowling master of the house.

"Tell me, Percival," he said, "have you had a pleasant drive? And has your

pretty shining Brown Molly come back at all tired?"

"Brown Molly be hanged--and the drive too! I want my lunch."

"And I want five minutes' talk with you, Percival, first," returned the Count. "Five minutes' talk, my friend, here on the grass."

"What about?"

"About business that very much concerns you."

I lingered long enough in passing through the hall-door to hear this question and answer, and to see Sir Percival thrust his hands into his pockets in sullen hesitation.

"If you want to badger me with any more of your infernal scruples," he said, "I for one won't hear them. I want my lunch."

"Come out here and speak to me," repeated the Count, still perfectly uninfluenced by the rudest speech that his friend could make to him.

Sir Percival descended the steps. The Count took him by the arm, and walked him away gently. The "business," I was sure, referred to the question of the signature. They were speaking of Laura and of me beyond a doubt. I felt heart-sick and faint with anxiety. It might be of the last importance to both of us to know what they were saying to each other at that moment, and not one word of it could by any possibility reach my ears.

I walked about the house, from room to room, with the lawyer's letter in my bosom (I was afraid by this time even to trust it under lock and key), till the oppression of my suspense half maddened me. There were no signs of Laura's return, and I thought of going out to look for her. But my strength was so exhausted by the trials and anxieties of the morning that the heat of the day quite overpowered me, and after an attempt to get to the door I was obliged to return to the drawing-room and lie down on the nearest sofa to recover.

I was just composing myself when the door opened softly and the Count looked in.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Halcombe," he said; "I only venture to disturb you because I am the bearer of good news. Percival--who is capricious in everything, as you know--has seen fit to alter his mind at the last moment,

and the business of the signature is put off for the present. A great relief to all of us, Miss Halcombe, as I see with pleasure in your face. Pray present my best respects and felicitations, when you mention this pleasant change of circumstances to Lady Glyde."

He left me before I had recovered my astonishment. There could be no doubt that this extraordinary alteration of purpose in the matter of the signature was due to his influence, and that his discovery of my application to London yesterday, and of my having received an answer to it to-day, had offered him the means of interfering with certain success.

I felt these impressions, but my mind seemed to share the exhaustion of my body, and I was in no condition to dwell on them with any useful reference to the doubtful present or the threatening future. I tried a second time to run out and find Laura, but my head was giddy and my knees trembled under me. There was no choice but to give it up again and return to the sofa, sorely against my will.

The quiet in the house, and the low murmuring hum of summer insects outside the open window, soothed me. My eyes closed of themselves, and I passed gradually into a strange condition, which was not waking--for I knew nothing of what was going on about me, and not sleeping--for I was conscious of my own repose. In this state my fevered mind broke loose from me, while my weary body was at rest, and in a trance, or day-dream of my fancy--I know not what to call it--I saw Walter Hartright. I had not thought of him since I rose that morning--Laura had not said one word to me either directly or indirectly referring to him--and yet I saw him now as plainly as if the past time had returned, and we were both together again at Limmeridge House.

He appeared to me as one among many other men, none of whose faces I could plainly discern. They were all lying on the steps of an immense ruined temple. Colossal tropical trees--with rank creepers twining endlessly about their trunks, and hideous stone idols glimmering and grinning at intervals behind leaves and stalks and branches--surrounded the temple and shut out the sky, and threw a dismal shadow over the forlorn band of men on the steps. White exhalations twisted and curled up stealthily from the ground, approached the men in wreaths like smoke, touched them, and stretched them out dead, one by one, in the places where they lay. An agony of pity and fear for Walter loosened my tongue, and I implored him to escape. "Come back, come back!" I said. "Remember your promise to HER and to ME. Come back to us before the Pestilence reaches you and lays you dead like the rest!"

He looked at me with an unearthly quiet in his face. "Wait," he said, "I shall come back. The night when I met the lost Woman on the highway was the night which set my life apart to be the instrument of a Design that is yet unseen. Here, lost in the wilderness, or there, welcomed back in the land of my birth, I am still walking on the dark road which leads me, and you, and the sister of your love and mine, to the unknown Retribution and the inevitable End. Wait and look. The Pestilence which touches the rest will pass ME."

I saw him again. He was still in the forest, and the numbers of his lost companions had dwindled to very few. The temple was gone, and the idols were gone--and in their place the figures of dark, dwarfish men lurked murderously among the trees, with bows in their hands, and arrows fitted to the string. Once more I feared for Walter, and cried out to warn him. Once more he turned to me, with the immovable quiet in his face.

"Another step," he said, "on the dark road. Wait and look. The arrows that strike the rest will spare me."

I saw him for the third time in a wrecked ship, stranded on a wild, sandy shore. The overloaded boats were making away from him for the land, and he alone was left to sink with the ship. I cried to him to hail the hindmost boat, and to make a last effort for his life. The quiet face looked at me in return, and the unmoved voice gave me back the changeless reply. "Another step on the journey. Wait and look. The Sea which drowns the rest will spare me."

I saw him for the last time. He was kneeling by a tomb of white marble, and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath and waited by his side. The unearthly quiet of his face had changed to an unearthly sorrow. But the terrible certainty of his words remained the same. "Darker and darker," he said; "farther and farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young--and spares me. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope, are steps of my journey, and take me nearer and nearer to the End."

My heart sank under a dread beyond words, under a grief beyond tears. The darkness closed round the pilgrim at the marble tomb--closed round the veiled woman from the grave--closed round the dreamer who looked on them. I saw and heard no more.

I was aroused by a hand laid on my shoulder. It was Laura's.

She had dropped on her knees by the side of the sofa. Her face was flushed and agitated, and her eyes met mine in a wild bewildered manner. I started the instant I saw her.

"What has happened?" I asked. "What has frightened you?"

She looked round at the half-open door, put her lips close to my ear, and answered in a whisper--

"Marian!--the figure at the lake--the footsteps last night--I've just seen her! I've just spoken to her!"

"Who, for Heaven's sake?"

"Anne Catherick."

I was so startled by the disturbance in Laura's face and manner, and so dismayed by the first waking impressions of my dream, that I was not fit to bear the revelation which burst upon me when that name passed her lips. I could only stand rooted to the floor, looking at her in breathless silence.

She was too much absorbed by what had happened to notice the effect which her reply had produced on me. "I have seen Anne Catherick! I have spoken to Anne Catherick!" she repeated as if I had not heard her. "Oh, Marian, I have such things to tell you! Come away--we may be interrupted here--come at once into my room."

With those eager words she caught me by the hand, and led me through the library, to the end room on the ground floor, which had been fitted up for her own especial use. No third person, except her maid, could have any excuse for surprising us here. She pushed me in before her, locked the door, and drew the chintz curtains that hung over the inside.

The strange, stunned feeling which had taken possession of me still remained. But a growing conviction that the complications which had long threatened to gather about her, and to gather about me, had suddenly closed fast round us both, was now beginning to penetrate my mind. I could not express it in words--I could hardly even realise it dimly in my own thoughts. "Anne Catherick!" I whispered to myself, with useless, helpless reiteration--"Anne Catherick!"

Laura drew me to the nearest seat, an ottoman in the middle of the room.

"Look!" she said, "look here!"--and pointed to the bosom of her dress.

I saw, for the first time, that the lost brooch was pinned in its place again. There was something real in the sight of it, something real in the touching of it afterwards, which seemed to steady the whirl and confusion in my thoughts, and to help me to compose myself.

"Where did you find your brooch?" The first words I could say to her were the words which put that trivial question at that important moment.

"SHE found it, Marian."

"Where?"

"On the floor of the boat-house. Oh, how shall I begin--how shall I tell you about it! She talked to me so strangely--she looked so fearfully ill--she left me so suddenly!"

Her voice rose as the tumult of her recollections pressed upon her mind. The inveterate distrust which weighs, night and day, on my spirits in this house, instantly roused me to warn her--just as the sight of the brooch had roused me to question her, the moment before.

"Speak low," I said. "The window is open, and the garden path runs beneath it. Begin at the beginning, Laura. Tell me, word for word, what passed between that woman and you."

"Shall I close the window?"

"No, only speak low--only remember that Anne Catherick is a dangerous subject under your husband's roof. Where did you first see her?"

"At the boat-house, Marian. I went out, as you know, to find my brooch, and I walked along the path through the plantation, looking down on the ground carefully at every step. In that way I got on, after a long time, to the boat-house, and as soon as I was inside it, I went on my knees to hunt over the floor. I was still searching with my back to the doorway, when I heard a soft, strange voice behind me say, 'Miss Fairlie.'"

"Miss Fairlie!"

"Yes, my old name--the dear, familiar name that I thought I had parted from for ever. I started up--not frightened, the voice was too kind and gentle to

frighten anybody--but very much surprised. There, looking at me from the doorway, stood a woman, whose face I never remembered to have seen before--"

"How was she dressed?"

"She had a neat, pretty white gown on, and over it a poor worn thin dark shawl. Her bonnet was of brown straw, as poor and worn as the shawl. I was struck by the difference between her gown and the rest of her dress, and she saw that I noticed it. 'Don't look at my bonnet and shawl,' she said, speaking in a quick, breathless, sudden way; 'if I mustn't wear white, I don't care what I wear. Look at my gown as much as you please--I'm not ashamed of that.' Very strange, was it not? Before I could say anything to soothe her, she held out one of her hands, and I saw my brooch in it. I was so pleased and so grateful, that I went quite close to her to say what I really felt. 'Are you thankful enough to do me one little kindness?' she asked. 'Yes, indeed,' I answered, 'any kindness in my power I shall be glad to show you.' 'Then let me pin your brooch on for you, now I have found it.' Her request was so unexpected, Marian, and she made it with such extraordinary eagerness, that I drew back a step or two, not well knowing what to do. 'Ah!' she said, 'your mother would have let me pin on the brooch.' There was something in her voice and her look, as well as in her mentioning my mother in that reproachful manner, which made me ashamed of my distrust. I took her hand with the brooch in it, and put it up gently on the bosom of my dress. 'You knew my mother?' I said. 'Was it very long ago? have I ever seen you before?' Her hands were busy fastening the brooch: she stopped and pressed them against my breast. 'You don't remember a fine spring day at Limmeridge,' she said, 'and your mother walking down the path that led to the school, with a little girl on each side of her? I have had nothing else to think of since, and I remember it. You were one of the little girls, and I was the other. Pretty, clever Miss Fairlie, and poor dazed Anne Catherick were nearer to each other then than they are now!'"

"Did you remember her, Laura, when she told you her name?"

"Yes, I remembered your asking me about Anne Catherick at Limmeridge, and your saying that she had once been considered like me."

"What reminded you of that, Laura?"

"SHE reminded me. While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face

was pale and thin and weary--but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery--I don't know why--gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her for the moment."

"Did she seem hurt by your silence?"

"I am afraid she was hurt by it. 'You have not got your mother's face,' she said, 'or your mother's heart. Your mother's face was dark, and your mother's heart, Miss Fairlie, was the heart of an angel.' 'I am sure I feel kindly towards you,' I said, 'though I may not be able to express it as I ought. Why do you call me Miss Fairlie?----' 'Because I love the name of Fairlie and hate the name of Glyde,' she broke out violently. I had seen nothing like madness in her before this, but I fancied I saw it now in her eyes. 'I only thought you might not know I was married,' I said, remembering the wild letter she wrote to me at Limmeridge, and trying to quiet her. She sighed bitterly, and turned away from me. 'Not know you were married?' she repeated. 'I am here BECAUSE you are married. I am here to make atonement to you, before I meet your mother in the world beyond the grave.' She drew farther and farther away from me, till she was out of the boat-house, and then she watched and listened for a little while. When she turned round to speak again, instead of coming back, she stopped where she was, looking in at me, with a hand on each side of the entrance. 'Did you see me at the lake last night?' she said. 'Did you hear me following you in the wood? I have been waiting for days together to speak to you alone--I have left the only friend I have in the world, anxious and frightened about me--I have risked being shut up again in the mad-house--and all for your sake, Miss Fairlie, all for your sake.' Her words alarmed me, Marian, and yet there was something in the way she spoke that made me pity her with all my heart. I am sure my pity must have been sincere, for it made me bold enough to ask the poor creature to come in, and sit down in the boat-house, by my side."

"Did she do so?"

"No. She shook her head, and told me she must stop where she was, to watch and listen, and see that no third person surprised us. And from first to last, there she waited at the entrance, with a hand on each side of it, sometimes bending in suddenly to speak to me, sometimes drawing back suddenly to look about her. 'I was here yesterday,' she said, 'before it came dark, and I heard you, and the lady with you, talking together. I heard you tell her about your husband. I heard you say you had no influence to make him believe you, and no influence to keep him silent. Ah! I knew what those

words meant--my conscience told me while I was listening. Why did I ever let you marry him! Oh, my fear--my mad, miserable, wicked fear! 'She covered up her face in her poor worn shawl, and moaned and murmured to herself behind it. I began to be afraid she might break out into some terrible despair which neither she nor I could master. 'Try to quiet yourself,' I said; 'try to tell me how you might have prevented my marriage.' She took the shawl from her face, and looked at me vacantly. 'I ought to have had heart enough to stop at Limmeridge,' she answered. 'I ought never to have let the news of his coming there frighten me away. I ought to have warned you and saved you before it was too late. Why did I only have courage enough to write you that letter? Why did I only do harm, when I wanted and meant to do good? Oh, my fear--my mad, miserable, wicked fear!' She repeated those words again, and hid her face again in the end of her poor worn shawl. It was dreadful to see her, and dreadful to hear her."

"Surely, Laura, you asked what the fear was which she dwelt on so earnestly?"

"Yes, I asked that."

"And what did she say?"

"She asked me in return, if I should not be afraid of a man who had shut me up in a mad-house, and who would shut me up again, if he could? I said, 'Are you afraid still? Surely you would not be here if you were afraid now?' 'No,' she said, 'I am not afraid now.' I asked why not. She suddenly bent forward into the boat-house, and said, 'Can't you guess why?' I shook my head. 'Look at me,' she went on. I told her I was grieved to see that she looked very sorrowful and very ill. She smiled for the first time. 'Ill?' she repeated; 'I'm dying. You know why I'm not afraid of him now. Do you think I shall meet your mother in heaven? Will she forgive me if I do?' I was so shocked and so startled, that I could make no reply. 'I have been thinking of it,' she went on, 'all the time I have been in hiding from your husband, all the time I lay ill. My thoughts have driven me here--I want to make atonement--I want to undo all I can of the harm I once did.' I begged her as earnestly as I could to tell me what she meant. She still looked at me with fixed vacant eyes. 'SHALL I undo the harm?' she said to herself doubtfully. 'You have friends to take your part. If YOU know his Secret, he will be afraid of you, he won't dare use you as he used me. He must treat you mercifully for his own sake, if he is afraid of you and your friends. And if he treats you mercifully, and if I can say it was my doing----' I listened eagerly for more, but she stopped at those words."

"You tried to make her go on?"

"I tried, but she only drew herself away from me again, and leaned her face and arms against the side of the boat-house. 'Oh!' I heard her say, with a dreadful, distracted tenderness in her voice, 'oh! if I could only be buried with your mother! If I could only wake at her side, when the angel's trumpet sounds, and the graves give up their dead at the resurrection!'--Marian! I trembled from head to foot--it was horrible to hear her. 'But there is no hope of that,' she said, moving a little, so as to look at me again, 'no hope for a poor stranger like me. I shall not rest under the marble cross that I washed with my own hands, and made so white and pure for her sake. Oh no! oh no! God's mercy, not man's, will take me to her, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.' She spoke those words quietly and sorrowfully, with a heavy, hopeless sigh, and then waited a little. Her face was confused and troubled, she seemed to be thinking, or trying to think. 'What was it I said just now?' she asked after a while. 'When your mother is in my mind, everything else goes out of it. What was I saying? what was I saying?' I reminded the poor creature, as kindly and delicately as I could. 'Ah, yes, yes,' she said, still in a vacant, perplexed manner. 'You are helpless with your wicked husband. Yes. And I must do what I have come to do here--I must make it up to you for having been afraid to speak out at a better time.' 'What IS it you have to tell me?' I asked. 'The Secret that your cruel husband is afraid of,' she answered. 'I once threatened him with the Secret, and frightened him. You shall threaten him with the Secret, and frighten him too.' Her face darkened, and a hard, angry stare fixed itself in her eyes. She began waving her hand at me in a vacant, unmeaning manner. 'My mother knows the Secret,' she said. 'My mother has wasted under the Secret half her lifetime. One day, when I was grown up, she said something to ME. And the next day your husband----'"

"Yes! yes! Go on. What did she tell you about your husband?"

"She stopped again, Marian, at that point----"

"And said no more?"

"And listened eagerly. 'Hush!' she whispered, still waving her hand at me. 'Hush!' She moved aside out of the doorway, moved slowly and stealthily, step by step, till I lost her past the edge of the boat-house."

"Surely you followed her?"

"Yes, my anxiety made me bold enough to rise and follow her. Just as I

reached the entrance, she appeared again suddenly, round the side of the boat-house. 'The Secret,' I whispered to her--'wait and tell me the Secret!' She caught hold of my arm, and looked at me with wild frightened eyes. 'Not now,' she said, 'we are not alone--we are watched. Come here to-morrow at this time--by yourself--mind--by yourself.' She pushed me roughly into the boat-house again, and I saw her no more."

"Oh, Laura, Laura, another chance lost! If I had only been near you she should not have escaped us. On which side did you lose sight of her?"

"On the left side, where the ground sinks and the wood is thickest."

"Did you run out again? did you call after her?"

"How could I? I was too terrified to move or speak."

"But when you DID move--when you came out?"

"I ran back here, to tell you what had happened."

"Did you see any one, or hear any one, in the plantation?"

"No, it seemed to be all still and quiet when I passed through it."

I waited for a moment to consider. Was this third person, supposed to have been secretly present at the interview, a reality, or the creature of Anne Catherick's excited fancy? It was impossible to determine. The one thing certain was, that we had failed again on the very brink of discovery--failed utterly and irretrievably, unless Anne Catherick kept her appointment at the boat-house for the next day.

"Are you quite sure you have told me everything that passed? Every word that was said?" I inquired.

"I think so," she answered. "My powers of memory, Marian, are not like yours. But I was so strongly impressed, so deeply interested, that nothing of any importance can possibly have escaped me."

"My dear Laura, the merest trifles are of importance where Anne Catherick is concerned. Think again. Did no chance reference escape her as to the place in which she is living at the present time?"

"None that I can remember."

"Did she not mention a companion and friend--a woman named Mrs. Clements?"

"Oh yes! yes! I forgot that. She told me Mrs. Clements wanted sadly to go with her to the lake and take care of her, and begged and prayed that she would not venture into this neighbourhood alone."

"Was that all she said about Mrs. Clements?"

"Yes, that was all."

"She told you nothing about the place in which she took refuge after leaving Todd's Corner?"

"Nothing--I am quite sure."

"Nor where she has lived since? Nor what her illness had been?"

"No, Marian, not a word. Tell me, pray tell me, what you think about it. I don't know what to think, or what to do next."

"You must do this, my love: You must carefully keep the appointment at the boat-house to-morrow. It is impossible to say what interests may not depend on your seeing that woman again. You shall not be left to yourself a second time. I will follow you at a safe distance. Nobody shall see me, but I will keep within hearing of your voice, if anything happens. Anne Catherick has escaped Walter Hartright, and has escaped you. Whatever happens, she shall not escape ME."

Laura's eyes read mine attentively.

"You believe," she said, "in this secret that my husband is afraid of? Suppose, Marian, it should only exist after all in Anne Catherick's fancy? Suppose she only wanted to see me and to speak to me, for the sake of old remembrances? Her manner was so strange--I almost doubted her. Would you trust her in other things?"

"I trust nothing, Laura, but my own observation of your husband's conduct. I judge Anne Catherick's words by his actions, and I believe there is a secret."

I said no more, and got up to leave the room. Thoughts were troubling me

which I might have told her if we had spoken together longer, and which it might have been dangerous for her to know. The influence of the terrible dream from which she had awakened me hung darkly and heavily over every fresh impression which the progress of her narrative produced on my mind. I felt the ominous future coming close, chilling me with an unutterable awe, forcing on me the conviction of an unseen design in the long series of complications which had now fastened round us. I thought of Hartright--as I saw him in the body when he said farewell; as I saw him in the spirit in my dream--and I too began to doubt now whether we were not advancing blindfold to an appointed and an inevitable end.

Leaving Laura to go upstairs alone, I went out to look about me in the walks near the house. The circumstances under which Anne Catherick had parted from her had made me secretly anxious to know how Count Fosco was passing the afternoon, and had rendered me secretly distrustful of the results of that solitary journey from which Sir Percival had returned but a few hours since.

After looking for them in every direction and discovering nothing, I returned to the house, and entered the different rooms on the ground floor one after another. They were all empty. I came out again into the hall, and went upstairs to return to Laura. Madame Fosco opened her door as I passed it in my way along the passage, and I stopped to see if she could inform me of the whereabouts of her husband and Sir Percival. Yes, she had seen them both from her window more than an hour since. The Count had looked up with his customary kindness, and had mentioned with his habitual attention to her in the smallest trifles, that he and his friend were going out together for a long walk.

For a long walk! They had never yet been in each other's company with that object in my experience of them. Sir Percival cared for no exercise but riding, and the Count (except when he was polite enough to be my escort) cared for no exercise at all.

When I joined Laura again, I found that she had called to mind in my absence the impending question of the signature to the deed, which, in the interest of discussing her interview with Anne Catherick, we had hitherto overlooked. Her first words when I saw her expressed her surprise at the absence of the expected summons to attend Sir Percival in the library.

"You may make your mind easy on that subject," I said. "For the present, at least, neither your resolution nor mine will be exposed to any further trial. Sir Percival has altered his plans--the business of the signature is put off."

"Put off?" Laura repeated amazedly. "Who told you so?"

"My authority is Count Fosco. I believe it is to his interference that we are indebted for your husband's sudden change of purpose."

"It seems impossible, Marian. If the object of my signing was, as we suppose, to obtain money for Sir Percival that he urgently wanted, how can the matter be put off?"

"I think, Laura, we have the means at hand of setting that doubt at rest. Have you forgotten the conversation that I heard between Sir Percival and the lawyer as they were crossing the hall?"

"No, but I don't remember----"

"I do. There were two alternatives proposed. One was to obtain your signature to the parchment. The other was to gain time by giving bills at three months. The last resource is evidently the resource now adopted, and we may fairly hope to be relieved from our share in Sir Percival's embarrassments for some time to come."

"Oh, Marian, it sounds too good to be true!"

"Does it, my love? You complimented me on my ready memory not long since, but you seem to doubt it now. I will get my journal, and you shall see if I am right or wrong."

I went away and got the book at once.

On looking back to the entry referring to the lawyer's visit, we found that my recollection of the two alternatives presented was accurately correct. It was almost as great a relief to my mind as to Laura's, to find that my memory had served me, on this occasion, as faithfully as usual. In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation, it is hard to say what future interests may not depend upon the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them.

Laura's face and manner suggested to me that this last consideration had occurred to her as well as to myself. Anyway, it is only a trifling matter, and I am almost ashamed to put it down here in writing--it seems to set the forlornness of our situation in such a miserably vivid light. We must have little indeed to depend on, when the discovery that my memory can still be

trusted to serve us is hailed as if it was the discovery of a new friend!

The first bell for dinner separated us. Just as it had done ringing, Sir Percival and the Count returned from their walk. We heard the master of the house storming at the servants for being five minutes late, and the master's guest interposing, as usual, in the interests of propriety, patience, and peace.

* * * * * * * * * *

The evening has come and gone. No extraordinary event has happened. But I have noticed certain peculiarities in the conduct of Sir Percival and the Count, which have sent me to my bed feeling very anxious and uneasy about Anne Catherick, and about the results which to-morrow may produce.

I know enough by this time, to be sure, that the aspect of Sir Percival which is the most false, and which, therefore, means the worst, is his polite aspect. That long walk with his friend had ended in improving his manners, especially towards his wife. To Laura's secret surprise and to my secret alarm, he called her by her Christian name, asked if she had heard lately from her uncle, inquired when Mrs. Vesey was to receive her invitation to Blackwater, and showed her so many other little attentions that he almost recalled the days of his hateful courtship at Limmeridge House. This was a bad sign to begin with, and I thought it more ominous still that he should pretend after dinner to fall asleep in the drawing-room, and that his eyes should cunningly follow Laura and me when he thought we neither of us suspected him. I have never had any doubt that his sudden journey by himself took him to Welmingham to question Mrs. Catherick--but the experience of to-night has made me fear that the expedition was not undertaken in vain, and that he has got the information which he unquestionably left us to collect. If I knew where Anne Catherick was to be found, I would be up to-morrow with sunrise and warn her.

While the aspect under which Sir Percival presented himself to-night was unhappily but too familiar to me, the aspect under which the Count appeared was, on the other hand, entirely new in my experience of him. He permitted me, this evening, to make his acquaintance, for the first time, in the character of a Man of Sentiment--of sentiment, as I believe, really felt, not assumed for the occasion.

For instance, he was quiet and subdued--his eyes and his voice expressed a restrained sensibility. He wore (as if there was some hidden connection between his showiest finery and his deepest feeling) the most magnificent

waistcoat he has yet appeared in--it was made of pale sea-green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid. His voice sank into the tenderest inflections, his smile expressed a thoughtful, fatherly admiration, whenever he spoke to Laura or to me. He pressed his wife's hand under the table when she thanked him for trifling little attentions at dinner. He took wine with her. "Your health and happiness, my angel!" he said, with fond glistening eyes. He ate little or nothing, and sighed, and said "Good Percival!" when his friend laughed at him. After dinner, he took Laura by the hand, and asked her if she would be "so sweet as to play to him." She complied, through sheer astonishment. He sat by the piano, with his watch-chain resting in folds, like a golden serpent, on the sea-green protuberance of his waistcoat. His immense head lay languidly on one side, and he gently beat time with two of his yellow-white fingers. He highly approved of the music, and tenderly admired Laura's manner of playing--not as poor Hartright used to praise it, with an innocent enjoyment of the sweet sounds, but with a clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch in the second. As the evening closed in, he begged that the lovely dying light might not be profaned, just yet, by the appearance of the lamps. He came, with his horribly silent tread, to the distant window at which I was standing, to be out of his way and to avoid the very sight of him--he came to ask me to support his protest against the lamps. If any one of them could only have burnt him up at that moment, I would have gone down to the kitchen and fetched it myself.

"Surely you like this modest, trembling English twilight?" he said softly. "Ah! I love it. I feel my inborn admiration of all that is noble, and great, and good, purified by the breath of heaven on an evening like this. Nature has such imperishable charms, such inextinguishable tenderness for me!--I am an old, fat man--talk which would become your lips, Miss Halcombe, sounds like a derision and a mockery on mine. It is hard to be laughed at in my moments of sentiment, as if my soul was like myself, old and overgrown. Observe, dear lady, what a light is dying on the trees! Does it penetrate your heart, as it penetrates mine?"

He paused, looked at me, and repeated the famous lines of Dante on the Evening-time, with a melody and tenderness which added a charm of their own to the matchless beauty of the poetry itself.

"Bah!" he cried suddenly, as the last cadence of those noble Italian words died away on his lips; "I make an old fool of myself, and only weary you all! Let us shut up the window in our bosoms and get back to the matter-of-fact world. Percival! I sanction the admission of the lamps. Lady Glyde--Miss Halcombe--Eleanor, my good wife--which of you will indulge me with a game

at dominoes?"

He addressed us all, but he looked especially at Laura.

She had learnt to feel my dread of offending him, and she accepted his proposal. It was more than I could have done at that moment. I could not have sat down at the same table with him for any consideration. His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternately. The mystery and terror of my dream, which had haunted me at intervals all through the evening, now oppressed my mind with an unendurable foreboding and an unutterable awe. I saw the white tomb again, and the veiled woman rising out of it by Hartright's side. The thought of Laura welled up like a spring in the depths of my heart, and filled it with waters of bitterness, never, never known to it before. I caught her by the hand as she passed me on her way to the table, and kissed her as if that night was to part us for ever. While they were all gazing at me in astonishment, I ran out through the low window which was open before me to the ground--ran out to hide from them in the darkness, to hide even from myself.

We separated that evening later than usual. Towards midnight the summer silence was broken by the shuddering of a low, melancholy wind among the trees. We all felt the sudden chill in the atmosphere, but the Count was the first to notice the stealthy rising of the wind. He stopped while he was lighting my candle for me, and held up his hand warningly--

"Listen!" he said. "There will be a change to-morrow."

VII

June 19th.--The events of yesterday warned me to be ready, sooner or later, to meet the worst. To-day is not yet at an end, and the worst has come.

Judging by the closest calculation of time that Laura and I could make, we arrived at the conclusion that Anne Catherick must have appeared at the boat-house at half-past two o'clock on the afternoon of yesterday. I accordingly arranged that Laura should just show herself at the luncheon-table to-day, and should then slip out at the first opportunity, leaving me behind to preserve appearances, and to follow her as soon as I could safely do so. This mode of proceeding, if no obstacles occurred to thwart us, would enable her to be at the boat-house before half-past two, and (when I left the table, in my turn) would take me to a safe position in the plantation before three.

The change in the weather, which last night's wind warned us to expect, came with the morning. It was raining heavily when I got up, and it continued to rain until twelve o'clock--when the clouds dispersed, the blue sky appeared, and the sun shone again with the bright promise of a fine afternoon.

My anxiety to know how Sir Percival and the Count would occupy the early part of the day was by no means set at rest, so far as Sir Percival was concerned, by his leaving us immediately after breakfast, and going out by himself, in spite of the rain. He neither told us where he was going nor when we might expect him back. We saw him pass the breakfast-room window hastily, with his high boots and his waterproof coat on--and that was all.

The Count passed the morning quietly indoors, some part of it in the library, some part in the drawing-room, playing odds and ends of music on the piano, and humming to himself. Judging by appearances, the sentimental side of his character was persistently inclined to betray itself still. He was silent and sensitive, and ready to sigh and languish ponderously (as only fat men CAN sigh and languish) on the smallest provocation.

Luncheon-time came and Sir Percival did not return. The Count took his friend's place at the table, plaintively devoured the greater part of a fruit tart, submerged under a whole jugful of cream, and explained the full merit of the achievement to us as soon as he had done. "A taste for sweets," he

said in his softest tones and his tenderest manner, "is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them--it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me."

Laura left the table in ten minutes' time. I was sorely tempted to accompany her. But if we had both gone out together we must have excited suspicion, and worse still, if we allowed Anne Catherick to see Laura, accompanied by a second person who was a stranger to her, we should in all probability forfeit her confidence from that moment, never to regain it again.

I waited, therefore, as patiently as I could, until the servant came in to clear the table. When I quitted the room, there were no signs, in the house or out of it, of Sir Percival's return. I left the Count with a piece of sugar between his lips, and the vicious cockatoo scrambling up his waistcoat to get at it, while Madame Fosco, sitting opposite to her husband, watched the proceedings of his bird and himself as attentively as if she had never seen anything of the sort before in her life. On my way to the plantation I kept carefully beyond the range of view from the luncheon-room window. Nobody saw me and nobody followed me. It was then a quarter to three o'clock by my watch.

Once among the trees I walked rapidly, until I had advanced more than half-way through the plantation. At that point I slackened my pace and proceeded cautiously, but I saw no one, and heard no voices. By little and little I came within view of the back of the boat-house--stopped and listened--then went on, till I was close behind it, and must have heard any persons who were talking inside. Still the silence was unbroken--still far and near no sign of a living creature appeared anywhere.

After skirting round by the back of the building, first on one side and then on the other, and making no discoveries, I ventured in front of it, and fairly looked in. The place was empty.

I called, "Laura!"--at first softly, then louder and louder. No one answered and no one appeared. For all that I could see and hear, the only human creature in the neighbourhood of the lake and the plantation was myself.

My heart began to beat violently, but I kept my resolution, and searched, first the boat-house and then the ground in front of it, for any signs which might show me whether Laura had really reached the place or not. No mark of her presence appeared inside the building, but I found traces of her outside it, in footsteps on the sand.

I detected the footsteps of two persons--large footsteps like a man's, and small footsteps, which, by putting my own feet into them and testing their size in that manner, I felt certain were Laura's. The ground was confusedly marked in this way just before the boat-house. Close against one side of it, under shelter of the projecting roof, I discovered a little hole in the sand--a hole artificially made, beyond a doubt. I just noticed it, and then turned away immediately to trace the footsteps as far as I could, and to follow the direction in which they might lead me.

They led me, starting from the left-hand side of the boat-house, along the edge of the trees, a distance, I should think, of between two and three hundred yards, and then the sandy ground showed no further trace of them. Feeling that the persons whose course I was tracking must necessarily have entered the plantation at this point, I entered it too. At first I could find no path, but I discovered one afterwards, just faintly traced among the trees, and followed it. It took me, for some distance, in the direction of the village, until I stopped at a point where another foot-track crossed it. The brambles grew thickly on either side of this second path. I stood looking down it, uncertain which way to take next, and while I looked I saw on one thorny branch some fragments of fringe from a woman's shawl. A closer examination of the fringe satisfied me that it had been torn from a shawl of Laura's, and I instantly followed the second path. It brought me out at last, to my great relief, at the back of the house. I say to my great relief, because I inferred that Laura must, for some unknown reason, have returned before me by this roundabout way. I went in by the court-yard and the offices. The first person whom I met in crossing the servants' hall was Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper.

"Do you know," I asked, "whether Lady Glyde has come in from her walk or not?"

"My lady came in a little while ago with Sir Percival," answered the housekeeper. "I am afraid, Miss Halcombe, something very distressing has happened."

My heart sank within me. "You don't mean an accident?" I said faintly.

"No, no--thank God, no accident. But my lady ran upstairs to her own room in tears, and Sir Percival has ordered me to give Fanny warning to leave in an hour's time."

Fanny was Laura's maid--a good affectionate girl who had been with her for years--the only person in the house whose fidelity and devotion we could

both depend upon.

"Where is Fanny?" I inquired.

"In my room, Miss Halcombe. The young woman is quite overcome, and I told her to sit down and try to recover herself."

I went to Mrs. Michelson's room, and found Fanny in a corner, with her box by her side, crying bitterly.

She could give me no explanation whatever of her sudden dismissal. Sir Percival had ordered that she should have a month's wages, in place of a month's warning, and go. No reason had been assigned--no objection had been made to her conduct. She had been forbidden to appeal to her mistress, forbidden even to see her for a moment to say good-bye. She was to go without explanations or farewells, and to go at once.

After soothing the poor girl by a few friendly words, I asked where she proposed to sleep that night. She replied that she thought of going to the little inn in the village, the landlady of which was a respectable woman, known to the servants at Blackwater Park. The next morning, by leaving early, she might get back to her friends in Cumberland without stopping in London, where she was a total stranger.

I felt directly that Fanny's departure offered us a safe means of communication with London and with Limmeridge House, of which it might be very important to avail ourselves. Accordingly, I told her that she might expect to hear from her mistress or from me in the course of the evening, and that she might depend on our both doing all that lay in our power to help her, under the trial of leaving us for the present. Those words said, I shook hands with her and went upstairs.

The door which led to Laura's room was the door of an ante-chamber opening on to the passage. When I tried it, it was bolted on the inside.

I knocked, and the door was opened by the same heavy, overgrown housemaid whose lumpish insensibility had tried my patience so severely on the day when I found the wounded dog.

I had, since that time, discovered that her name was Margaret Porcher, and that she was the most awkward, slatternly, and obstinate servant in the house.

On opening the door she instantly stepped out to the threshold, and stood grinning at me in stolid silence.

"Why do you stand there?" I said. "Don't you see that I want to come in?"

"Ah, but you mustn't come in," was the answer, with another and a broader grin still.

"How dare you talk to me in that way? Stand back instantly!"

She stretched out a great red hand and arm on each side of her, so as to bar the doorway, and slowly nodded her addle head at me.

"Master's orders," she said, and nodded again.

I had need of all my self-control to warn me against contesting the matter with HER, and to remind me that the next words I had to say must be addressed to her master. I turned my back on her, and instantly went downstairs to find him. My resolution to keep my temper under all the irritations that Sir Percival could offer was, by this time, as completely forgotten--I say so to my shame--as if I had never made it. It did me good, after all I had suffered and suppressed in that house--it actually did me good to feel how angry I was.

The drawing-room and the breakfast-room were both empty. I went on to the library, and there I found Sir Percival, the Count, and Madame Fosco. They were all three standing up, close together, and Sir Percival had a little slip of paper in his hand. As I opened the door I heard the Count say to him, "No--a thousand times over, no."

I walked straight up to him, and looked him full in the face.

"Am I to understand, Sir Percival, that your wife's room is a prison, and that your housemaid is the gaoler who keeps it?" I asked.

"Yes, that is what you are to understand," he answered. "Take care my gaoler hasn't got double duty to do--take care your room is not a prison too."

"Take YOU care how you treat your wife, and how you threaten ME," I broke out in the heat of my anger. "There are laws in England to protect women from cruelty and outrage. If you hurt a hair of Laura's head, if you dare to interfere with my freedom, come what may, to those laws I will appeal."

Instead of answering me he turned round to the Count.

"What did I tell you?" he asked. "What do you say now?"

"What I said before," replied the Count--"No."

Even in the vehemence of my anger I felt his calm, cold, grey eyes on my face. They turned away from me as soon as he had spoken, and looked significantly at his wife. Madame Fosco immediately moved close to my side, and in that position addressed Sir Percival before either of us could speak again.

"Favour me with your attention for one moment," she said, in her clear icily-suppressed tones. "I have to thank you, Sir Percival, for your hospitality, and to decline taking advantage of it any longer. I remain in no house in which ladies are treated as your wife and Miss Halcombe have been treated here to-day!"

Sir Percival drew back a step, and stared at her in dead silence. The declaration he had just heard--a declaration which he well knew, as I well knew, Madame Fosco would not have ventured to make without her husband's permission--seemed to petrify him with surprise. The Count stood by, and looked at his wife with the most enthusiastic admiration.

"She is sublime!" he said to himself. He approached her while he spoke, and drew her hand through his arm. "I am at your service, Eleanor," he went on, with a quiet dignity that I had never noticed in him before. "And at Miss Halcombe's service, if she will honour me by accepting all the assistance I can offer her."

"Damn it! what do you mean?" cried Sir Percival, as the Count quietly moved away with his wife to the door.

"At other times I mean what I say, but at this time I mean what my wife says," replied the impenetrable Italian. "We have changed places, Percival, for once, and Madame Fosco's opinion is--mine."

Sir Percival crumpled up the paper in his hand, and pushing past the Count, with another oath, stood between him and the door.

"Have your own way," he said, with baffled rage in his low, half-whispering tones. "Have your own way--and see what comes of it." With those words he left the room.

Madame Fosco glanced inquiringly at her husband. "He has gone away very suddenly," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It means that you and I together have brought the worst-tempered man in all England to his senses," answered the Count. "It means, Miss Halcombe, that Lady Glyde is relieved from a gross indignity, and you from the repetition of an unpardonable insult. Suffer me to express my admiration of your conduct and your courage at a very trying moment."

"Sincere admiration," suggested Madame Fosco.

"Sincere admiration," echoed the Count.

I had no longer the strength of my first angry resistance to outrage and injury to support me. My heart-sick anxiety to see Laura, my sense of my own helpless ignorance of what had happened at the boat-house, pressed on me with an intolerable weight. I tried to keep up appearances by speaking to the Count and his wife in the tone which they had chosen to adopt in speaking to me, but the words failed on my lips--my breath came short and thick--my eyes looked longingly, in silence, at the door. The Count, understanding my anxiety, opened it, went out, and pulled it to after him. At the same time Sir Percival's heavy step descended the stairs. I heard them whispering together outside, while Madame Fosco was assuring me, in her calmest and most conventional manner, that she rejoiced, for all our sakes, that Sir Percival's conduct had not obliged her husband and herself to leave Blackwater Park. Before she had done speaking the whispering ceased, the door opened, and the Count looked in.

"Miss Halcombe," he said, "I am happy to inform you that Lady Glyde is mistress again in her own house. I thought it might be more agreeable to you to hear of this change for the better from me than from Sir Percival, and I have therefore expressly returned to mention it."

"Admirable delicacy!" said Madame Fosco, paying back her husband's tribute of admiration with the Count's own coin, in the Count's own manner. He smiled and bowed as if he had received a formal compliment from a polite stranger, and drew back to let me pass out first.

Sir Percival was standing in the hall. As I hurried to the stairs I heard him call impatiently to the Count to come out of the library.

"What are you waiting there for?" he said. "I want to speak to you."

"And I want to think a little by myself," replied the other. "Wait till later, Percival, wait till later."

Neither he nor his friend said any more. I gained the top of the stairs and ran along the passage. In my haste and my agitation I left the door of the ante-chamber open, but I closed the door of the bedroom the moment I was inside it.

Laura was sitting alone at the far end of the room, her arms resting wearily on a table, and her face hidden in her hands. She started up with a cry of delight when she saw me.

"How did you get here?" she asked. "Who gave you leave? Not Sir Percival?"

In my overpowering anxiety to hear what she had to tell me, I could not answer her--I could only put questions on my side. Laura's eagerness to know what had passed downstairs proved, however, too strong to be resisted. She persistently repeated her inquiries.

"The Count, of course," I answered impatiently. "Whose influence in the house----"

She stopped me with a gesture of disgust.

"Don't speak of him," she cried. "The Count is the vilest creature breathing! The Count is a miserable Spy----!"

Before we could either of us say another word we were alarmed by a soft knocking at the door of the bedroom.

I had not yet sat down, and I went first to see who it was. When I opened the door Madame Fosco confronted me with my handkerchief in her hand.

"You dropped this downstairs, Miss Halcombe," she said, "and I thought I could bring it to you, as I was passing by to my own room."

Her face, naturally pale, had turned to such a ghastly whiteness that I started at the sight of it. Her hands, so sure and steady at all other times, trembled violently, and her eyes looked wolfishly past me through the open door, and fixed on Laura.

She had been listening before she knocked! I saw it in her white face, I saw

it in her trembling hands, I saw it in her look at Laura.

After waiting an instant she turned from me in silence, and slowly walked away.

I closed the door again. "Oh, Laura! Laura! We shall both rue the day when you called the Count a Spy!"

"You would have called him so yourself, Marian, if you had known what I know. Anne Catherick was right. There was a third person watching us in the plantation yesterday, and that third person---"

"Are you sure it was the Count?"

"I am absolutely certain. He was Sir Percival's spy--he was Sir Percival's informer--he set Sir Percival watching and waiting, all the morning through, for Anne Catherick and for me."

"Is Anne found? Did you see her at the lake?"

"No. She has saved herself by keeping away from the place. When I got to the boat-house no one was there."

"Yes? Yes?"

"I went in and sat waiting for a few minutes. But my restlessness made me get up again, to walk about a little. As I passed out I saw some marks on the sand, close under the front of the boat-house. I stooped down to examine them, and discovered a word written in large letters on the sand. The word was--LOOK."

"And you scraped away the sand, and dug a hollow place in it?"

"How do you know that, Marian?"

"I saw the hollow place myself when I followed you to the boat-house. Go on--go on!"

"Yes, I scraped away the sand on the surface, and in a little while I came to a strip of paper hidden beneath, which had writing on it. The writing was signed with Anne Catherick's initials."

"Where is it?"

"Sir Percival has taken it from me."

"Can you remember what the writing was? Do you think you can repeat it to me?"

"In substance I can, Marian. It was very short. You would have remembered it, word for word."

"Try to tell me what the substance was before we go any further."

She complied. I write the lines down here exactly as she repeated them to me. They ran thus--

"I was seen with you, yesterday, by a tall, stout old man, and had to run to save myself. He was not quick enough on his feet to follow me, and he lost me among the trees. I dare not risk coming back here to-day at the same time. I write this, and hide it in the sand, at six in the morning, to tell you so. When we speak next of your wicked husband's Secret we must speak safely, or not at all. Try to have patience. I promise you shall see me again and that soon.--A. C."

The reference to the "tall, stout old man" (the terms of which Laura was certain that she had repeated to me correctly) left no doubt as to who the intruder had been. I called to mind that I had told Sir Percival, in the Count's presence the day before, that Laura had gone to the boat-house to look for her brooch. In all probability he had followed her there, in his officious way, to relieve her mind about the matter of the signature, immediately after he had mentioned the change in Sir Percival's plans to me in the drawing-room. In this case he could only have got to the neighbourhood of the boat-house at the very moment when Anne Catherick discovered him. The suspiciously hurried manner in which she parted from Laura had no doubt prompted his useless attempt to follow her. Of the conversation which had previously taken place between them he could have heard nothing. The distance between the house and the lake, and the time at which he left me in the drawing-room, as compared with the time at which Laura and Anne Catherick had been speaking together, proved that fact to us at any rate, beyond a doubt.

Having arrived at something like a conclusion so far, my next great interest was to know what discoveries Sir Percival had made after Count Fosco had given him his information.

"How came you to lose possession of the letter?" I asked. "What did you do with it when you found it in the sand?"

"After reading it once through," she replied, "I took it into the boat-house with me to sit down and look over it a second time. While I was reading a shadow fell across the paper. I looked up, and saw Sir Percival standing in the doorway watching me."

"Did you try to hide the letter?"

"I tried, but he stopped me. 'You needn't trouble to hide that,' he said. 'I happen to have read it.' I could only look at him helplessly--I could say nothing. 'You understand?' he went on; 'I have read it. I dug it up out of the sand two hours since, and buried it again, and wrote the word above it again, and left it ready to your hands. You can't lie yourself out of the scrape now. You saw Anne Catherick in secret yesterday, and you have got her letter in your hand at this moment. I have not caught HER yet, but I have caught YOU. Give me the letter.' He stepped close up to me--I was alone with him, Marian--what could I do?--I gave him the letter."

"What did he say when you gave it to him?"

"At first he said nothing. He took me by the arm, and led me out of the boat-house, and looked about him on all sides, as if he was afraid of our being seen or heard. Then he clasped his hand fast round my arm, and whispered to me, 'What did Anne Catherick say to you yesterday? I insist on hearing every word, from first to last.'"

"Did you tell him?"

"I was alone with him, Marian--his cruel hand was bruising my arm--what could I do?"

"Is the mark on your arm still? Let me see it."

"Why do you want to see it?"

"I want to see it, Laura, because our endurance must end, and our resistance must begin to-day. That mark is a weapon to strike him with. Let me see it now--I may have to swear to it at some future time."

"Oh, Marian, don't look so--don't talk so! It doesn't hurt me now!"

"Let me see it!"

She showed me the marks. I was past grieving over them, past crying over them, past shuddering over them. They say we are either better than men, or worse. If the temptation that has fallen in some women's way, and made them worse, had fallen in mine at that moment--Thank God! my face betrayed nothing that his wife could read. The gentle, innocent, affectionate creature thought I was frightened for her and sorry for her, and thought no more.

"Don't think too seriously of it, Marian," she said simply, as she pulled her sleeve down again. "It doesn't hurt me now."

"I will try to think quietly of it, my love, for your sake.--Well! well! And you told him all that Anne Catherick had said to you--all that you told me?"

"Yes, all. He insisted on it--I was alone with him--I could conceal nothing."

"Did he say anything when you had done?"

"He looked at me, and laughed to himself in a mocking, bitter way. 'I mean to have the rest out of you,' he said, 'do you hear?--the rest.' I declared to him solemnly that I had told him everything I knew. 'Not you,' he answered, 'you know more than you choose to tell. Won't you tell it? You shall! I'll wring it out of you at home if I can't wring it out of you here.' He led me away by a strange path through the plantation--a path where there was no hope of our meeting you--and he spoke no more till we came within sight of the house. Then he stopped again, and said, 'Will you take a second chance, if I give it to you? Will you think better of it, and tell me the rest?' I could only repeat the same words I had spoken before. He cursed my obstinacy, and went on, and took me with him to the house. 'You can't deceive me,' he said, 'you know more than you choose to tell. I'll have your secret out of you, and I'll have it out of that sister of yours as well. There shall be no more plotting and whispering between you. Neither you nor she shall see each other again till you have confessed the truth. I'll have you watched morning, noon, and night, till you confess the truth.' He was deaf to everything I could say. He took me straight upstairs into my own room. Fanny was sitting there, doing some work for me, and he instantly ordered her out. 'I'll take good care YOU'RE not mixed up in the conspiracy,' he said. 'You shall leave this house to-day. If your mistress wants a maid, she shall have one of my choosing.' He pushed me into the room, and locked the door on me. He set that senseless woman to watch me outside, Marian! He looked and spoke like a madman. You may hardly understand it--he did indeed."

"I do understand it, Laura. He is mad--mad with the terrors of a guilty conscience. Every word you have said makes me positively certain that when Anne Catherick left you yesterday you were on the eve of discovering a secret which might have been your vile husband's ruin, and he thinks you HAVE discovered it. Nothing you can say or do will quiet that guilty distrust, and convince his false nature of your truth. I don't say this, my love, to alarm you. I say it to open your eyes to your position, and to convince you of the urgent necessity of letting me act, as I best can, for your protection while the chance is our own. Count Fosco's interference has secured me access to you to-day, but he may withdraw that interference to-morrow. Sir Percival has already dismissed Fanny because she is a quick-witted girl, and devotedly attached to you, and has chosen a woman to take her place who cares nothing for your interests, and whose dull intelligence lowers her to the level of the watch-dog in the yard. It is impossible to say what violent measures he may take next, unless we make the most of our opportunities while we have them."

"What can we do, Marian? Oh, if we could only leave this house, never to see it again!"

"Listen to me, my love, and try to think that you are not quite helpless so long as I am here with you."

"I will think so--I do think so. Don't altogether forget poor Fanny in thinking of me. She wants help and comfort too."

"I will not forget her. I saw her before I came up here, and I have arranged to communicate with her to-night. Letters are not safe in the post-bag at Blackwater Park, and I shall have two to write to-day, in your interests, which must pass through no hands but Fanny's."

"What letters?"

"I mean to write first, Laura, to Mr. Gilmore's partner, who has offered to help us in any fresh emergency. Little as I know of the law, I am certain that it can protect a woman from such treatment as that ruffian has inflicted on you to-day. I will go into no details about Anne Catherick, because I have no certain information to give. But the lawyer shall know of those bruises on your arm, and of the violence offered to you in this room--he shall, before I rest to-night!"

"But think of the exposure, Marian!"

"I am calculating on the exposure. Sir Percival has more to dread from it than you have. The prospect of an exposure may bring him to terms when nothing else will."

I rose as I spoke, but Laura entreated me not to leave her. "You will drive him to desperation," she said, "and increase our dangers tenfold."

I felt the truth--the disheartening truth--of those words. But I could not bring myself plainly to acknowledge it to her. In our dreadful position there was no help and no hope for us but in risking the worst. I said so in guarded terms. She sighed bitterly, but did not contest the matter. She only asked about the second letter that I had proposed writing. To whom was it to be addressed?

"To Mr. Fairlie," I said. "Your uncle is your nearest male relative, and the head of the family. He must and shall interfere."

Laura shook her head sorrowfully.

"Yes, yes," I went on, "your uncle is a weak, selfish, worldly man, I know, but he is not Sir Percival Glyde, and he has no such friend about him as Count Fosco. I expect nothing from his kindness or his tenderness of feeling towards you or towards me, but he will do anything to pamper his own indolence, and to secure his own quiet. Let me only persuade him that his interference at this moment will save him inevitable trouble and wretchedness and responsibility hereafter, and he will bestir himself for his own sake. I know how to deal with him, Laura--I have had some practice."

"If you could only prevail on him to let me go back to Limmeridge for a little while and stay there quietly with you, Marian, I could be almost as happy again as I was before I was married!"

Those words set me thinking in a new direction. Would it be possible to place Sir Percival between the two alternatives of either exposing himself to the scandal of legal interference on his wife's behalf, or of allowing her to be quietly separated from him for a time under pretext of a visit to her uncle's house? And could he, in that case, be reckoned on as likely to accept the last resource? It was doubtful--more than doubtful. And yet, hopeless as the experiment seemed, surely it was worth trying. I resolved to try it in sheer despair of knowing what better to do.

"Your uncle shall know the wish you have just expressed," I said, "and I will

ask the lawyer's advice on the subject as well. Good may come of it--and will come of it, I hope."

Saying that I rose again, and again Laura tried to make me resume my seat.

"Don't leave me," she said uneasily. "My desk is on that table. You can write here."

It tried me to the quick to refuse her, even in her own interests. But we had been too long shut up alone together already. Our chance of seeing each other again might entirely depend on our not exciting any fresh suspicions. It was full time to show myself, quietly and unconcernedly, among the wretches who were at that very moment, perhaps, thinking of us and talking of us downstairs. I explained the miserable necessity to Laura, and prevailed on her to recognise it as I did.

"I will come back again, love, in an hour or less," I said. "The worst is over for to-day. Keep yourself quiet and fear nothing."

"Is the key in the door, Marian? Can I lock it on the inside?"

"Yes, here is the key. Lock the door, and open it to nobody until I come upstairs again."

I kissed her and left her. It was a relief to me as I walked away to hear the key turned in the lock, and to know that the door was at her own command.

VIII

June 19th.--I had only got as far as the top of the stairs when the locking of Laura's door suggested to me the precaution of also locking my own door, and keeping the key safely about me while I was out of the room. My journal was already secured with other papers in the table drawer, but my writing materials were left out. These included a seal bearing the common device of two doves drinking out of the same cup, and some sheets of blotting-paper, which had the impression on them of the closing lines of my writing in these pages traced during the past night. Distorted by the suspicion which had now become a part of myself, even such trifles as these looked too dangerous to be trusted without a guard--even the locked table drawer seemed to be not sufficiently protected in my absence until the means of access to it had been carefully secured as well.

I found no appearance of any one having entered the room while I had been talking with Laura. My writing materials (which I had given the servant instructions never to meddle with) were scattered over the table much as usual. The only circumstance in connection with them that at all struck me was that the seal lay tidily in the tray with the pencils and the wax. It was not in my careless habits (I am sorry to say) to put it there, neither did I remember putting it there. But as I could not call to mind, on the other hand, where else I had thrown it down, and as I was also doubtful whether I might not for once have laid it mechanically in the right place, I abstained from adding to the perplexity with which the day's events had filled my mind by troubling it afresh about a trifle. I locked the door, put the key in my pocket, and went downstairs.

Madame Fosco was alone in the hall looking at the weather-glass.

"Still falling," she said. "I am afraid we must expect more rain."

Her face was composed again to its customary expression and its customary colour. But the hand with which she pointed to the dial of the weather-glass still trembled.

Could she have told her husband already that she had overheard Laura reviling him, in my company, as a "spy?" My strong suspicion that she must have told him, my irresistible dread (all the more overpowering from its very vagueness) of the consequences which might follow, my fixed conviction, derived from various little self-betrayals which women notice in each other,

that Madame Fosco, in spite of her well-assumed external civility, had not forgiven her niece for innocently standing between her and the legacy of ten thousand pounds--all rushed upon my mind together, all impelled me to speak in the vain hope of using my own influence and my own powers of persuasion for the atonement of Laura's offence.

"May I trust to your kindness to excuse me, Madame Fosco, if I venture to speak to you on an exceedingly painful subject?"

She crossed her hands in front of her and bowed her head solemnly, without uttering a word, and without taking her eyes off mine for a moment.

"When you were so good as to bring me back my handkerchief," I went on, "I am very, very much afraid you must have accidentally heard Laura say something which I am unwilling to repeat, and which I will not attempt to defend. I will only venture to hope that you have not thought it of sufficient importance to be mentioned to the Count?"

"I think it of no importance whatever," said Madame Fosco sharply and suddenly. "But," she added, resuming her icy manner in a moment, "I have no secrets from my husband even in trifles. When he noticed just now that I looked distressed, it was my painful duty to tell him why I was distressed, and I frankly acknowledge to you, Miss Halcombe, that I HAVE told him."

I was prepared to hear it, and yet she turned me cold all over when she said those words.

"Let me earnestly entreat you, Madame Fosco--let me earnestly entreat the Count--to make some allowances for the sad position in which my sister is placed. She spoke while she was smarting under the insult and injustice inflicted on her by her husband, and she was not herself when she said those rash words. May I hope that they will be considerately and generously forgiven?"

"Most assuredly," said the Count's quiet voice behind me. He had stolen on us with his noiseless tread and his book in his hand from the library.

"When Lady Glyde said those hasty words," he went on, "she did me an injustice which I lament--and forgive. Let us never return to the subject, Miss Halcombe; let us all comfortably combine to forget it from this moment."

"You are very kind," I said, "you relieve me inexpressibly."

I tried to continue, but his eyes were on me; his deadly smile that hides everything was set, hard, and unwavering on his broad, smooth face. My distrust of his unfathomable falseness, my sense of my own degradation in stooping to conciliate his wife and himself, so disturbed and confused me, that the next words failed on my lips, and I stood there in silence.

"I beg you on my knees to say no more, Miss Halcombe--I am truly shocked that you should have thought it necessary to say so much." With that polite speech he took my hand--oh, how I despise myself! oh, how little comfort there is even in knowing that I submitted to it for Laura's sake!--he took my hand and put it to his poisonous lips. Never did I know all my horror of him till then. That innocent familiarity turned my blood as if it had been the vilest insult that a man could offer me. Yet I hid my disgust from him--I tried to smile--I, who once mercilessly despised deceit in other women, was as false as the worst of them, as false as the Judas whose lips had touched my hand.

I could not have maintained my degrading self-control--it is all that redeems me in my own estimation to know that I could not--if he had still continued to keep his eyes on my face. His wife's tigerish jealousy came to my rescue and forced his attention away from me the moment he possessed himself of my hand. Her cold blue eyes caught light, her dull white cheeks flushed into bright colour, she looked years younger than her age in an instant.

"Count!" she said. "Your foreign forms of politeness are not understood by Englishwomen."

"Pardon me, my angel! The best and dearest Englishwoman in the world understands them." With those words he dropped my hand and quietly raised his wife's hand to his lips in place of it.

I ran back up the stairs to take refuge in my own room. If there had been time to think, my thoughts, when I was alone again, would have caused me bitter suffering. But there was no time to think. Happily for the preservation of my calmness and my courage there was time for nothing but action.

The letters to the lawyer and to Mr. Fairlie were still to be written, and I sat down at once without a moment's hesitation to devote myself to them.

There was no multitude of resources to perplex me--there was absolutely no one to depend on, in the first instance, but myself. Sir Percival had neither friends nor relatives in the neighbourhood whose intercession I could

attempt to employ. He was on the coldest terms--in some cases on the worst terms with the families of his own rank and station who lived near him. We two women had neither father nor brother to come to the house and take our parts. There was no choice but to write those two doubtful letters, or to put Laura in the wrong and myself in the wrong, and to make all peaceable negotiation in the future impossible by secretly escaping from Blackwater Park. Nothing but the most imminent personal peril could justify our taking that second course. The letters must be tried first, and I wrote them.

I said nothing to the lawyer about Anne Catherick, because (as I had already hinted to Laura) that topic was connected with a mystery which we could not yet explain, and which it would therefore be useless to write about to a professional man. I left my correspondent to attribute Sir Percival's disgraceful conduct, if he pleased, to fresh disputes about money matters, and simply consulted him on the possibility of taking legal proceedings for Laura's protection in the event of her husband's refusal to allow her to leave Blackwater Park for a time and return with me to Limmeridge. I referred him to Mr. Fairlie for the details of this last arrangement--I assured him that I wrote with Laura's authority--and I ended by entreating him to act in her name to the utmost extent of his power and with the least possible loss of time.

The letter to Mr. Fairlie occupied me next. I appealed to him on the terms which I had mentioned to Laura as the most likely to make him bestir himself; I enclosed a copy of my letter to the lawyer to show him how serious the case was, and I represented our removal to Limmeridge as the only compromise which would prevent the danger and distress of Laura's present position from inevitably affecting her uncle as well as herself at no very distant time.

When I had done, and had sealed and directed the two envelopes, I went back with the letters to Laura's room, to show her that they were written.

"Has anybody disturbed you?" I asked, when she opened the door to me.

"Nobody has knocked," she replied. "But I heard some one in the outer room."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman. I heard the rustling of her gown."

"A rustling like silk?"

"Yes, like silk."

Madame Fosco had evidently been watching outside. The mischief she might do by herself was little to be feared. But the mischief she might do, as a willing instrument in her husband's hands, was too formidable to be overlooked.

"What became of the rustling of the gown when you no longer heard it in the ante-room?" I inquired. "Did you hear it go past your wall, along the passage?"

"Yes. I kept still and listened, and just heard it."

"Which way did it go?"

"Towards your room."

I considered again. The sound had not caught my ears. But I was then deeply absorbed in my letters, and I write with a heavy hand and a quill pen, scraping and scratching noisily over the paper. It was more likely that Madame Fosco would hear the scraping of my pen than that I should hear the rustling of her dress. Another reason (if I had wanted one) for not trusting my letters to the post-bag in the hall.

Laura saw me thinking. "More difficulties!" she said wearily; "more difficulties and more dangers!"

"No dangers," I replied. "Some little difficulty, perhaps. I am thinking of the safest way of putting my two letters into Fanny's hands."

"You have really written them, then? Oh, Marian, run no risks--pray, pray run no risks!"

"No, no--no fear. Let me see--what o'clock is it now?"

It was a quarter to six. There would be time for me to get to the village inn, and to come back again before dinner. If I waited till the evening I might find no second opportunity of safely leaving the house.

"Keep the key turned in the lock. Laura," I said, "and don't be afraid about me. If you hear any inquiries made, call through the door, and say that I

am gone out for a walk."

"When shall you be back?"

"Before dinner, without fail. Courage, my love. By this time to-morrow you will have a clear-headed, trustworthy man acting for your good. Mr. Gilmore's partner is our next best friend to Mr. Gilmore himself."

A moment's reflection, as soon as I was alone, convinced me that I had better not appear in my walking-dress until I had first discovered what was going on in the lower part of the house. I had not ascertained yet whether Sir Percival was indoors or out.

The singing of the canaries in the library, and the smell of tobacco-smoke that came through the door, which was not closed, told me at once where the Count was. I looked over my shoulder as I passed the doorway, and saw to my surprise that he was exhibiting the docility of the birds in his most engagingly polite manner to the housekeeper. He must have specially invited her to see them--for she would never have thought of going into the library of her own accord. The man's slightest actions had a purpose of some kind at the bottom of every one of them. What could be his purpose here?

It was no time then to inquire into his motives. I looked about for Madame Fosco next, and found her following her favourite circle round and round the fish-pond.

I was a little doubtful how she would meet me, after the outbreak of jealousy of which I had been the cause so short a time since. But her husband had tamed her in the interval, and she now spoke to me with the same civility as usual. My only object in addressing myself to her was to ascertain if she knew what had become of Sir Percival. I contrived to refer to him indirectly, and after a little fencing on either side she at last mentioned that he had gone out.

"Which of the horses has he taken?" I asked carelessly.

"None of them," she replied. "He went away two hours since on foot. As I understood it, his object was to make fresh inquiries about the woman named Anne Catherick. He appears to be unreasonably anxious about tracing her. Do you happen to know if she is dangerously mad, Miss Halcombe?"

"I do not, Countess."

"Are you going in?"

"Yes, I think so. I suppose it will soon be time to dress for dinner."

We entered the house together. Madame Fosco strolled into the library, and closed the door. I went at once to fetch my hat and shawl. Every moment was of importance, if I was to get to Fanny at the inn and be back before dinner.

When I crossed the hall again no one was there, and the singing of the birds in the library had ceased. I could not stop to make any fresh investigations. I could only assure myself that the way was clear, and then leave the house with the two letters safe in my pocket.

On my way to the village I prepared myself for the possibility of meeting Sir Percival. As long as I had him to deal with alone I felt certain of not losing my presence of mind. Any woman who is sure of her own wits is a match at any time for a man who is not sure of his own temper. I had no such fear of Sir Percival as I had of the Count. Instead of fluttering, it had composed me, to hear of the errand on which he had gone out. While the tracing of Anne Catherick was the great anxiety that occupied him, Laura and I might hope for some cessation of any active persecution at his hands. For our sakes now, as well as for Anne's, I hoped and prayed fervently that she might still escape him.

I walked on as briskly as the heat would let me till I reached the cross-road which led to the village, looking back from time to time to make sure that I was not followed by any one.

Nothing was behind me all the way but an empty country waggon. The noise made by the lumbering wheels annoyed me, and when I found that the waggon took the road to the village, as well as myself, I stopped to let it go by and pass out of hearing. As I looked toward it, more attentively than before, I thought I detected at intervals the feet of a man walking close behind it, the carter being in front, by the side of his horses. The part of the cross-road which I had just passed over was so narrow that the waggon coming after me brushed the trees and thickets on either side, and I had to wait until it went by before I could test the correctness of my impression. Apparently that impression was wrong, for when the waggon had passed me the road behind it was quite clear.

I reached the inn without meeting Sir Percival, and without noticing anything more, and was glad to find that the landlady had received Fanny with all possible kindness. The girl had a little parlour to sit in, away from the noise of the taproom, and a clean bedchamber at the top of the house. She began crying again at the sight of me, and said, poor soul, truly enough, that it was dreadful to feel herself turned out into the world as if she had committed some unpardonable fault, when no blame could be laid at her door by anybody--not even by her master, who had sent her away.

"Try to make the best of it, Fanny," I said. "Your mistress and I will stand your friends, and will take care that your character shall not suffer. Now, listen to me. I have very little time to spare, and I am going to put a great trust in your hands. I wish you to take care of these two letters. The one with the stamp on it you are to put into the post when you reach London to-morrow. The other, directed to Mr. Fairlie, you are to deliver to him yourself as soon as you get home. Keep both the letters about you and give them up to no one. They are of the last importance to your mistress's interests."

Fanny put the letters into the bosom of her dress. "There they shall stop, miss," she said, "till I have done what you tell me."

"Mind you are at the station in good time to-morrow morning," I continued. "And when you see the housekeeper at Limmeridge give her my compliments, and say that you are in my service until Lady Glyde is able to take you back. We may meet again sooner than you think. So keep a good heart, and don't miss the seven o'clock train."

"Thank you, miss--thank you kindly. It gives one courage to hear your voice again. Please to offer my duty to my lady, and say I left all the things as tidy as I could in the time. Oh, dear! dear! who will dress her for dinner to-day? It really breaks my heart, miss, to think of it."

When I got back to the house I had only a quarter of an hour to spare to put myself in order for dinner, and to say two words to Laura before I went downstairs.

"The letters are in Fanny's hands," I whispered to her at the door. "Do you mean to join us at dinner?"

"Oh, no, no--not for the world."

"Has anything happened? Has any one disturbed you?"

"Yes--just now--Sir Percival----"

"Did he come in?"

"No, he frightened me by a thump on the door outside. I said, 'Who's there?' 'You know,' he answered. 'Will you alter your mind, and tell me the rest? You shall! Sooner or later I'll wring it out of you. You know where Anne Catherick is at this moment.' 'Indeed, indeed,' I said, 'I don't.' 'You do!' he called back. 'I'll crush your obstinacy--mind that!--I'll wring it out of you!' He went away with those words--went away, Marian, hardly five minutes ago."

He had not found Anne! We were safe for that night--he had not found her yet.

"You are going downstairs, Marian? Come up again in the evening."

"Yes, yes. Don't be uneasy if I am a little late--I must be careful not to give offence by leaving them too soon."

The dinner-bell rang and I hastened away.

Sir Percival took Madame Fosco into the dining-room, and the Count gave me his arm. He was hot and flushed, and was not dressed with his customary care and completeness. Had he, too, been out before dinner, and been late in getting back? or was he only suffering from the heat a little more severely than usual?

However this might be, he was unquestionably troubled by some secret annoyance or anxiety, which, with all his powers of deception, he was not able entirely to conceal. Through the whole of dinner he was almost as silent as Sir Percival himself, and he, every now and then, looked at his wife with an expression of furtive uneasiness which was quite new in my experience of him. The one social obligation which he seemed to be self-possessed enough to perform as carefully as ever was the obligation of being persistently civil and attentive to me. What vile object he has in view I cannot still discover, but be the design what it may, invariable politeness towards myself, invariable humility towards Laura, and invariable suppression (at any cost) of Sir Percival's clumsy violence, have been the means he has resolutely and impenetrably used to get to his end ever since he set foot in this house. I suspected it when he first interfered in our favour, on the day when the deed was produced in the library, and I feel certain of it now.

When Madame Fosco and I rose to leave the table, the Count rose also to accompany us back to the drawing-room.

"What are you going away for?" asked Sir Percival--"I mean YOU, Fosco."

"I am going away because I have had dinner enough, and wine enough," answered the Count. "Be so kind, Percival, as to make allowances for my foreign habit of going out with the ladies, as well as coming in with them."

"Nonsense! Another glass of claret won't hurt you. Sit down again like an Englishman. I want half an hour's quiet talk with you over our wine."

"A quiet talk, Percival, with all my heart, but not now, and not over the wine. Later in the evening, if you please--later in the evening."

"Civil!" said Sir Percival savagely. "Civil behaviour, upon my soul, to a man in his own house!"

I had more than once seen him look at the Count uneasily during dinner-time, and had observed that the Count carefully abstained from looking at him in return. This circumstance, coupled with the host's anxiety for a little quiet talk over the wine, and the guest's obstinate resolution not to sit down again at the table, revived in my memory the request which Sir Percival had vainly addressed to his friend earlier in the day to come out of the library and speak to him. The Count had deferred granting that private interview, when it was first asked for in the afternoon, and had again deferred granting it, when it was a second time asked for at the dinner-table. Whatever the coming subject of discussion between them might be, it was clearly an important subject in Sir Percival's estimation--and perhaps (judging from his evident reluctance to approach it) a dangerous subject as well, in the estimation of the Count.

These considerations occurred to me while we were passing from the dining-room to the drawing-room. Sir Percival's angry commentary on his friend's desertion of him had not produced the slightest effect. The Count obstinately accompanied us to the tea-table--waited a minute or two in the room--went out into the hall--and returned with the post-bag in his hands. It was then eight o'clock--the hour at which the letters were always despatched from Blackwater Park.

"Have you any letter for the post, Miss Halcombe?" he asked, approaching me with the bag.

I saw Madame Fosco, who was making the tea, pause, with the sugar-tongs in her hand, to listen for my answer.

"No, Count, thank you. No letters to-day."

He gave the bag to the servant, who was then in the room; sat down at the piano, and played the air of the lively Neapolitan street-song, "La mia Carolina," twice over. His wife, who was usually the most deliberate of women in all her movements, made the tea as quickly as I could have made it myself--finished her own cup in two minutes, and quietly glided out of the room.

I rose to follow her example--partly because I suspected her of attempting some treachery upstairs with Laura, partly because I was resolved not to remain alone in the same room with her husband.

Before I could get to the door the Count stopped me, by a request for a cup of tea. I gave him the cup of tea, and tried a second time to get away. He stopped me again--this time by going back to the piano, and suddenly appealing to me on a musical question in which he declared that the honour of his country was concerned.

I vainly pleaded my own total ignorance of music, and total want of taste in that direction. He only appealed to me again with a vehemence which set all further protest on my part at defiance. "The English and the Germans (he indignantly declared) were always reviling the Italians for their inability to cultivate the higher kinds of music. We were perpetually talking of our Oratorios, and they were perpetually talking of their Symphonies. Did we forget and did they forget his immortal friend and countryman, Rossini? What was Moses in Egypt but a sublime oratorio, which was acted on the stage instead of being coldly sung in a concert-room? What was the overture to Guillaume Tell but a symphony under another name? Had I heard Moses in Egypt? Would I listen to this, and this, and this, and say if anything more sublimely sacred and grand had ever been composed by mortal man?"--And without waiting for a word of assent or dissent on my part, looking me hard in the face all the time, he began thundering on the piano, and singing to it with loud and lofty enthusiasm--only interrupting himself, at intervals, to announce to me fiercely the titles of the different pieces of music: "Chorus of Egyptians in the Plague of Darkness, Miss Halcombe!"--"Recitativo of Moses with the tables of the Law."--"Prayer of Israelites, at the passage of the Red Sea. Aha! Aha! Is that sacred? is that sublime?" The piano trembled under his powerful hands, and the teacups on the table rattled, as his big bass voice thundered out the notes, and his heavy foot beat time on the floor.

There was something horrible--something fierce and devilish--in the outburst of his delight at his own singing and playing, and in the triumph with which he watched its effect upon me as I shrank nearer and nearer to the door. I was released at last, not by my own efforts, but by Sir Percival's interposition. He opened the dining-room door, and called out angrily to know what "that infernal noise" meant. The Count instantly got up from the piano. "Ah! if Percival is coming," he said, "harmony and melody are both at an end. The Muse of Music, Miss Halcombe, deserts us in dismay, and I, the fat old minstrel, exhale the rest of my enthusiasm in the open air!" He stalked out into the verandah, put his hands in his pockets, and resumed the Recitativo of Moses, sotto voce, in the garden.

I heard Sir Percival call after him from the dining-room window. But he took no notice--he seemed determined not to hear. That long-deferred quiet talk between them was still to be put off, was still to wait for the Count's absolute will and pleasure.

He had detained me in the drawing-room nearly half an hour from the time when his wife left us. Where had she been, and what had she been doing in that interval?

I went upstairs to ascertain, but I made no discoveries, and when I questioned Laura, I found that she had not heard anything. Nobody had disturbed her, no faint rustling of the silk dress had been audible, either in the ante-room or in the passage.

It was then twenty minutes to nine. After going to my room to get my journal, I returned, and sat with Laura, sometimes writing, sometimes stopping to talk with her. Nobody came near us, and nothing happened. We remained together till ten o'clock. I then rose, said my last cheering words, and wished her good-night. She locked her door again after we had arranged that I should come in and see her the first thing in the morning.

I had a few sentences more to add to my diary before going to bed myself, and as I went down again to the drawing-room after leaving Laura for the last time that weary day, I resolved merely to show myself there, to make my excuses, and then to retire an hour earlier than usual for the night.

Sir Percival, and the Count and his wife, were sitting together. Sir Percival was yawning in an easy-chair, the Count was reading, Madame Fosco was fanning herself. Strange to say, HER face was flushed now. She, who never suffered from the heat, was most undoubtedly suffering from it to-night.

"I am afraid, Countess, you are not quite so well as usual?" I said.

"The very remark I was about to make to you," she replied. "You are looking pale, my dear."

My dear! It was the first time she had ever addressed me with that familiarity! There was an insolent smile too on her face when she said the words.

"I am suffering from one of my bad headaches," I answered coldly.

"Ah, indeed? Want of exercise, I suppose? A walk before dinner would have been just the thing for you." She referred to the "walk" with a strange emphasis. Had she seen me go out? No matter if she had. The letters were safe now in Fanny's hands.

"Come and have a smoke, Fosco," said Sir Percival, rising, with another uneasy look at his friend.

"With pleasure, Percival, when the ladies have gone to bed," replied the Count.

"Excuse me, Countess, if I set you the example of retiring," I said. "The only remedy for such a headache as mine is going to bed."

I took my leave. There was the same insolent smile on the woman's face when I shook hands with her. Sir Percival paid no attention to me. He was looking impatiently at Madame Fosco, who showed no signs of leaving the room with me. The Count smiled to himself behind his book. There was yet another delay to that quiet talk with Sir Percival--and the Countess was the impediment this time.

IX

June 19th.--Once safely shut into my own room, I opened these pages, and prepared to go on with that part of the day's record which was still left to write.

For ten minutes or more I sat idle, with the pen in my hand, thinking over the events of the last twelve hours. When I at last addressed myself to my task, I found a difficulty in proceeding with it which I had never experienced before. In spite of my efforts to fix my thoughts on the matter in hand, they wandered away with the strangest persistency in the one direction of Sir Percival and the Count, and all the interest which I tried to concentrate on my journal centred instead in that private interview between them which had been put off all through the day, and which was now to take place in the silence and solitude of the night.

In this perverse state of my mind, the recollection of what had passed since the morning would not come back to me, and there was no resource but to close my journal and to get away from it for a little while.

I opened the door which led from my bedroom into my sitting-room, and having passed through, pulled it to again, to prevent any accident in case of draught with the candle left on the dressing-table. My sitting-room window was wide open, and I leaned out listlessly to look at the night.

It was dark and quiet. Neither moon nor stars were visible. There was a smell like rain in the still, heavy air, and I put my hand out of window. No. The rain was only threatening, it had not come yet.

I remained leaning on the window-sill for nearly a quarter of an hour, looking out absently into the black darkness, and hearing nothing, except now and then the voices of the servants, or the distant sound of a closing door, in the lower part of the house.

Just as I was turning away wearily from the window to go back to the bedroom and make a second attempt to complete the unfinished entry in my journal, I smelt the odour of tobacco-smoke stealing towards me on the heavy night air. The next moment I saw a tiny red spark advancing from the farther end of the house in the pitch darkness. I heard no footsteps, and I could see nothing but the spark. It travelled along in the night, passed the window at which I was standing, and stopped opposite my bedroom window,

inside which I had left the light burning on the dressing-table.

The spark remained stationary for a moment, then moved back again in the direction from which it had advanced. As I followed its progress I saw a second red spark, larger than the first, approaching from the distance. The two met together in the darkness. Remembering who smoked cigarettes and who smoked cigars, I inferred immediately that the Count had come out first to look and listen under my window, and that Sir Percival had afterwards joined him. They must both have been walking on the lawn--or I should certainly have heard Sir Percival's heavy footfall, though the Count's soft step might have escaped me, even on the gravel walk.

I waited quietly at the window, certain that they could neither of them see me in the darkness of the room.

"What's the matter?" I heard Sir Percival say in a low voice. "Why don't you come in and sit down?"

"I want to see the light out of that window," replied the Count softly.

"What harm does the light do?"

"It shows she is not in bed yet. She is sharp enough to suspect something, and bold enough to come downstairs and listen, if she can get the chance. Patience, Percival--patience."

"Humbug! You're always talking of patience."

"I shall talk of something else presently. My good friend, you are on the edge of your domestic precipice, and if I let you give the women one other chance, on my sacred word of honour they will push you over it!"

"What the devil do you mean?"

"We will come to our explanations, Percival, when the light is out of that window, and when I have had one little look at the rooms on each side of the library, and a peep at the staircase as well."

They slowly moved away, and the rest of the conversation between them (which had been conducted throughout in the same low tones) ceased to be audible. It was no matter. I had heard enough to determine me on justifying the Count's opinion of my sharpness and my courage. Before the red sparks were out of sight in the darkness I had made up my mind that

there should be a listener when those two men sat down to their talk--and that the listener, in spite of all the Count's precautions to the contrary, should be myself. I wanted but one motive to sanction the act to my own conscience, and to give me courage enough for performing it--and that motive I had. Laura's honour, Laura's happiness--Laura's life itself--might depend on my quick ears and my faithful memory to-night.

I had heard the Count say that he meant to examine the rooms on each side of the library, and the staircase as well, before he entered on any explanation with Sir Percival. This expression of his intentions was necessarily sufficient to inform me that the library was the room in which he proposed that the conversation should take place. The one moment of time which was long enough to bring me to that conclusion was also the moment which showed me a means of baffling his precautions--or, in other words, of hearing what he and Sir Percival said to each other, without the risk of descending at all into the lower regions of the house.

In speaking of the rooms on the ground floor I have mentioned incidentally the verandah outside them, on which they all opened by means of French windows, extending from the cornice to the floor. The top of this verandah was flat, the rain-water being carried off from it by pipes into tanks which helped to supply the house. On the narrow leaden roof, which ran along past the bedrooms, and which was rather less, I should think, than three feet below the sills of the window, a row of flower-pots was ranged, with wide intervals between each pot--the whole being protected from falling in high winds by an ornamental iron railing along the edge of the roof.

The plan which had now occurred to me was to get out at my sitting-room window on to this roof, to creep along noiselessly till I reached that part of it which was immediately over the library window, and to crouch down between the flower-pots, with my ear against the outer railing. If Sir Percival and the Count sat and smoked to-night, as I had seen them sitting and smoking many nights before, with their chairs close at the open window, and their feet stretched on the zinc garden seats which were placed under the verandah, every word they said to each other above a whisper (and no long conversation, as we all know by experience, can be carried on IN a whisper) must inevitably reach my ears. If, on the other hand, they chose to-night to sit far back inside the room, then the chances were that I should hear little or nothing--and in that case, I must run the far more serious risk of trying to outwit them downstairs.

Strongly as I was fortified in my resolution by the desperate nature of our situation, I hoped most fervently that I might escape this last emergency.

My courage was only a woman's courage after all, and it was very near to failing me when I thought of trusting myself on the ground floor, at the dead of night, within reach of Sir Percival and the Count.

I went softly back to my bedroom to try the safer experiment of the verandah roof first.

A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it on that still night might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this I put my black travelling cloak, and pulled the hood on to my head. In my ordinary evening costume I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I. The little breadth left on the roof of the verandah, between the flower-pots on one side and the wall and the windows of the house on the other, made this a serious consideration. If I knocked anything down, if I made the least noise, who could say what the consequences might be?

I only waited to put the matches near the candle before I extinguished it, and groped my way back into the sitting-room, I locked that door, as I had locked my bedroom door--then quietly got out of the window, and cautiously set my feet on the leaden roof of the verandah.

My two rooms were at the inner extremity of the new wing of the house in which we all lived, and I had five windows to pass before I could reach the position it was necessary to take up immediately over the library. The first window belonged to a spare room which was empty. The second and third windows belonged to Laura's room. The fourth window belonged to Sir Percival's room. The fifth belonged to the Countess's room. The others, by which it was not necessary for me to pass, were the windows of the Count's dressing-room, of the bathroom, and of the second empty spare room.

No sound reached my ears--the black blinding darkness of the night was all round me when I first stood on the verandah, except at that part of it which Madame Fosco's window overlooked. There, at the very place above the library to which my course was directed--there I saw a gleam of light! The Countess was not yet in bed.

It was too late to draw back--it was no time to wait. I determined to go on at all hazards, and trust for security to my own caution and to the darkness of the night. "For Laura's sake!" I thought to myself, as I took the first step

forward on the roof, with one hand holding my cloak close round me, and the other groping against the wall of the house. It was better to brush close by the wall than to risk striking my feet against the flower-pots within a few inches of me, on the other side.

I passed the dark window of the spare room, trying the leaden roof at each step with my foot before I risked resting my weight on it. I passed the dark windows of Laura's room ("God bless her and keep her to-night!"). I passed the dark window of Sir Percival's room. Then I waited a moment, knelt down with my hands to support me, and so crept to my position, under the protection of the low wall between the bottom of the lighted window and the verandah roof.

When I ventured to look up at the window itself I found that the top of it only was open, and that the blind inside was drawn down. While I was looking I saw the shadow of Madame Fosco pass across the white field of the blind--then pass slowly back again. Thus far she could not have heard me, or the shadow would surely have stopped at the blind, even if she had wanted courage enough to open the window and look out?

I placed myself sideways against the railing of the verandah--first ascertaining, by touching them, the position of the flower-pots on either side of me. There was room enough for me to sit between them and no more. The sweet-scented leaves of the flower on my left hand just brushed my cheek as I lightly rested my head against the railing.

The first sounds that reached me from below were caused by the opening or closing (most probably the latter) of three doors in succession--the doors, no doubt, leading into the hall and into the rooms on each side of the library, which the Count had pledged himself to examine. The first object that I saw was the red spark again travelling out into the night from under the verandah, moving away towards my window, waiting a moment, and then returning to the place from which it had set out.

"The devil take your restlessness! When do you mean to sit down?" growled Sir Percival's voice beneath me.

"Ouf! how hot it is!" said the Count, sighing and puffing wearily.

His exclamation was followed by the scraping of the garden chairs on the tiled pavement under the verandah--the welcome sound which told me they were going to sit close at the window as usual. So far the chance was mine. The clock in the turret struck the quarter to twelve as they settled

themselves in their chairs. I heard Madame Fosco through the open window yawning, and saw her shadow pass once more across the white field of the blind.

Meanwhile, Sir Percival and the Count began talking together below, now and then dropping their voices a little lower than usual, but never sinking them to a whisper. The strangeness and peril of my situation, the dread, which I could not master, of Madame Fosco's lighted window, made it difficult, almost impossible, for me, at first, to keep my presence of mind, and to fix my attention solely on the conversation beneath. For some minutes I could only succeed in gathering the general substance of it. I understood the Count to say that the one window alight was his wife's, that the ground floor of the house was quite clear, and that they might now speak to each other without fear of accidents. Sir Percival merely answered by upbraiding his friend with having unjustifiably slighted his wishes and neglected his interests all through the day. The Count thereupon defended himself by declaring that he had been beset by certain troubles and anxieties which had absorbed all his attention, and that the only safe time to come to an explanation was a time when they could feel certain of being neither interrupted nor overheard. "We are at a serious crisis in our affairs, Percival," he said, "and if we are to decide on the future at all, we must decide secretly to-night."

That sentence of the Count's was the first which my attention was ready enough to master exactly as it was spoken. From this point, with certain breaks and interruptions, my whole interest fixed breathlessly on the conversation, and I followed it word for word.

"Crisis?" repeated Sir Percival. "It's a worse crisis than you think for, I can tell you."

"So I should suppose, from your behaviour for the last day or two," returned the other coolly. "But wait a little. Before we advance to what I do NOT know, let us be quite certain of what I DO know. Let us first see if I am right about the time that is past, before I make any proposal to you for the time that is to come."

"Stop till I get the brandy and water. Have some yourself."

"Thank you, Percival. The cold water with pleasure, a spoon, and the basin of sugar. Eau sucree, my friend--nothing more."

"Sugar-and-water for a man of your age!--There! mix your sickly mess. You

foreigners are all alike."

"Now listen, Percival. I will put our position plainly before you, as I understand it, and you shall say if I am right or wrong. You and I both came back to this house from the Continent with our affairs very seriously embarrassed--"

"Cut it short! I wanted some thousands and you some hundreds, and without the money we were both in a fair way to go to the dogs together. There's the situation. Make what you can of it. Go on."

"Well, Percival, in your own solid English words, you wanted some thousands and I wanted some hundreds, and the only way of getting them was for you to raise the money for your own necessity (with a small margin beyond for my poor little hundreds) by the help of your wife. What did I tell you about your wife on our way to England?--and what did I tell you again when we had come here, and when I had seen for myself the sort of woman Miss Halcombe was?"

"How should I know? You talked nineteen to the dozen, I suppose, just as usual."

"I said this: Human ingenuity, my friend, has hitherto only discovered two ways in which a man can manage a woman. One way is to knock her down--a method largely adopted by the brutal lower orders of the people, but utterly abhorrent to the refined and educated classes above them. The other way (much longer, much more difficult, but in the end not less certain) is never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with animals, it holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the children, and the women all fail in. If they can once shake this superior quality in their master, they get the better of HIM. If they can never succeed in disturbing it, he gets the better of THEM. I said to you, Remember that plain truth when you want your wife to help you to the money. I said, Remember it doubly and trebly in the presence of your wife's sister, Miss Halcombe. Have you remembered it? Not once in all the implications that have twisted themselves about us in this house. Every provocation that your wife and her sister could offer to you, you instantly accepted from them. Your mad temper lost the signature to the deed, lost the ready money, set Miss Halcombe writing to the lawyer for the first time."

"First time! Has she written again?"

"Yes, she has written again to-day."

A chair fell on the pavement of the verandah--fell with a crash, as if it had been kicked down.

It was well for me that the Count's revelation roused Sir Percival's anger as it did. On hearing that I had been once more discovered I started so that the railing against which I leaned cracked again. Had he followed me to the inn? Did he infer that I must have given my letters to Fanny when I told him I had none for the post-bag. Even if it was so, how could he have examined the letters when they had gone straight from my hand to the bosom of the girl's dress?

"Thank your lucky star," I heard the Count say next, "that you have me in the house to undo the harm as fast as you do it. Thank your lucky star that I said No when you were mad enough to talk of turning the key to-day on Miss Halcombe, as you turned it in your mischievous folly on your wife. Where are your eyes? Can you look at Miss Halcombe and not see that she has the foresight and the resolution of a man? With that woman for my friend I would snap these fingers of mine at the world. With that woman for my enemy, I, with all my brains and experience--I, Fosco, cunning as the devil himself, as you have told me a hundred times--I walk, in your English phrase, upon egg-shells! And this grand creature--I drink her health in my sugar-and-water--this grand creature, who stands in the strength of her love and her courage, firm as a rock, between us two and that poor, flimsy, pretty blonde wife of yours--this magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul, though I oppose her in your interests and in mine, you drive to extremities as if she was no sharper and no bolder than the rest of her sex. Percival! Percival! you deserve to fail, and you HAVE failed."

There was a pause. I write the villain's words about myself because I mean to remember them--because I hope yet for the day when I may speak out once for all in his presence, and cast them back one by one in his teeth.

Sir Percival was the first to break the silence again.

"Yes, yes, bully and bluster as much as you like," he said sulkily; "the difficulty about the money is not the only difficulty. You would be for taking strong measures with the women yourself--if you knew as much as I do."

"We will come to that second difficulty all in good time," rejoined the Count. "You may confuse yourself, Percival, as much as you please, but you shall not confuse me. Let the question of the money be settled first. Have I

convinced your obstinacy? have I shown you that your temper will not let you help yourself?--Or must I go back, and (as you put it in your dear straightforward English) bully and bluster a little more?"

"Pooh! It's easy enough to grumble at ME. Say what is to be done--that's a little harder."

"Is it? Bah! This is what is to be done: You give up all direction in the business from to-night--you leave it for the future in my hands only. I am talking to a Practical British man--ha? Well, Practical, will that do for you?"

"What do you propose if I leave it all to you?"

"Answer me first. Is it to be in my hands or not?"

"Say it is in your hands--what then?"

"A few questions, Percival, to begin with. I must wait a little yet, to let circumstances guide me, and I must know, in every possible way, what those circumstances are likely to be. There is no time to lose. I have told you already that Miss Halcombe has written to the lawyer to-day for the second time."

"How did you find it out? What did she say?"

"If I told you, Percival, we should only come back at the end to where we are now. Enough that I have found it out--and the finding has caused that trouble and anxiety which made me so inaccessible to you all through to-day. Now, to refresh my memory about your affairs--it is some time since I talked them over with you. The money has been raised, in the absence of your wife's signature, by means of bills at three months--raised at a cost that makes my poverty-stricken foreign hair stand on end to think of it! When the bills are due, is there really and truly no earthly way of paying them but by the help of your wife?"

"None."

"What! You have no money at the bankers?"

"A few hundreds, when I want as many thousands."

"Have you no other security to borrow upon?"

"Not a shred."

"What have you actually got with your wife at the present moment?"

"Nothing but the interest of her twenty thousand pounds--barely enough to pay our daily expenses."

"What do you expect from your wife?"

"Three thousand a year when her uncle dies."

"A fine fortune, Percival. What sort of a man is this uncle? Old?"

"No--neither old nor young."

"A good-tempered, freely-living man? Married? No--I think my wife told me, not married."

"Of course not. If he was married, and had a son, Lady Glyde would not be next heir to the property. I'll tell you what he is. He's a maudlin, twaddling, selfish fool, and bores everybody who comes near him about the state of his health."

"Men of that sort, Percival, live long, and marry malevolently when you least expect it. I don't give you much, my friend, for your chance of the three thousand a year. Is there nothing more that comes to you from your wife?"

"Nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing--except in case of her death."

"Aha! in the case of her death."

There was another pause. The Count moved from the verandah to the gravel walk outside. I knew that he had moved by his voice. "The rain has come at last," I heard him say. It had come. The state of my cloak showed that it had been falling thickly for some little time.

The Count went back under the verandah--I heard the chair creak beneath his weight as he sat down in it again.

"Well, Percival," he said, "and in the case of Lady Glyde's death, what do you get then?"

"If she leaves no children----"

"Which she is likely to do?"

"Which she is not in the least likely to do----"

"Yes?"

"Why, then I get her twenty thousand pounds."

"Paid down?"

"Paid down."

They were silent once more. As their voices ceased Madame Fosco's shadow darkened the blind again. Instead of passing this time, it remained, for a moment, quite still. I saw her fingers steal round the corner of the blind, and draw it on one side. The dim white outline of her face, looking out straight over me, appeared behind the window. I kept still, shrouded from head to foot in my black cloak. The rain, which was fast wetting me, dripped over the glass, blurred it, and prevented her from seeing anything. "More rain!" I heard her say to herself. She dropped the blind, and I breathed again freely.

The talk went on below me, the Count resuming it this time.

"Percival! do you care about your wife?"

"Fosco! that's rather a downright question."

"I am a downright man, and I repeat it."

"Why the devil do you look at me in that way?"

"You won't answer me? Well, then, let us say your wife dies before the summer is out----"

"Drop it, Fosco!"

"Let us say your wife dies----"

"Drop it, I tell you!"

"In that case, you would gain twenty thousand pounds, and you would lose----"

"I should lose the chance of three thousand a year."

"The REMOTE chance, Percival--the remote chance only. And you want money, at once. In your position the gain is certain--the loss doubtful."

"Speak for yourself as well as for me. Some of the money I want has been borrowed for you. And if you come to gain, my wife's death would be ten thousand pounds in your wife's pocket. Sharp as you are, you seem to have conveniently forgotten Madame Fosco's legacy. Don't look at me in that way! I won't have it! What with your looks and your questions, upon my soul, you make my flesh creep!"

"Your flesh? Does flesh mean conscience in English? I speak of your wife's death as I speak of a possibility. Why not? The respectable lawyers who scribble-scrabble your deeds and your wills look the deaths of living people in the face. Do lawyers make your flesh creep? Why should I? It is my business to-night to clear up your position beyond the possibility of mistake, and I have now done it. Here is your position. If your wife lives, you pay those bills with her signature to the parchment. If your wife dies, you pay them with her death."

As he spoke the light in Madame Fosco's room was extinguished, and the whole second floor of the house was now sunk in darkness.

"Talk! talk!" grumbled Sir Percival. "One would think, to hear you, that my wife's signature to the deed was got already."

"You have left the matter in my hands," retorted the Count, "and I have more than two months before me to turn round in. Say no more about it, if you please, for the present. When the bills are due, you will see for yourself if my 'talk! talk!' is worth something, or if it is not. And now, Percival, having done with the money matters for to-night, I can place my attention at your disposal, if you wish to consult me on that second difficulty which has mixed itself up with our little embarrassments, and which has so altered you for the worse, that I hardly know you again. Speak, my friend--and pardon me if I shock your fiery national tastes by mixing myself a second glass of sugar-and-water."

"It's very well to say speak," replied Sir Percival, in a far more quiet and more polite tone than he had yet adopted, "but it's not so easy to know how to begin."

"Shall I help you?" suggested the Count. "Shall I give this private difficulty of yours a name? What if I call it--Anne Catherick?"

"Look here, Fosco, you and I have known each other for a long time, and if you have helped me out of one or two scrapes before this, I have done the best I could to help you in return, as far as money would go. We have made as many friendly sacrifices, on both sides, as men could, but we have had our secrets from each other, of course--haven't we?"

"You have had a secret from me, Percival. There is a skeleton in your cupboard here at Blackwater Park that has peeped out in these last few days at other people besides yourself."

"Well, suppose it has. If it doesn't concern you, you needn't be curious about it, need you?"

"Do I look curious about it?"

"Yes, you do."

"So! so! my face speaks the truth, then? What an immense foundation of good there must be in the nature of a man who arrives at my age, and whose face has not yet lost the habit of speaking the truth!--Come, Glyde! let us be candid one with the other. This secret of yours has sought me: I have not sought it. Let us say I am curious--do you ask me, as your old friend, to respect your secret, and to leave it, once for all, in your own keeping?"

"Yes--that's just what I do ask."

"Then my curiosity is at an end. It dies in me from this moment."

"Do you really mean that?"

"What makes you doubt me?"

"I have had some experience, Fosco, of your roundabout ways, and I am not so sure that you won't worm it out of me after all."

The chair below suddenly creaked again--I felt the trellis-work pillar under me shake from top to bottom. The Count had started to his feet, and had struck it with his hand in indignation.

"Percival! Percival!" he cried passionately, "do you know me no better than that? Has all your experience shown you nothing of my character yet? I am a man of the antique type! I am capable of the most exalted acts of virtue--when I have the chance of performing them. It has been the misfortune of my life that I have had few chances. My conception of friendship is sublime! Is it my fault that your skeleton has peeped out at me? Why do I confess my curiosity? You poor superficial Englishman, it is to magnify my own self-control. I could draw your secret out of you, if I liked, as I draw this finger out of the palm of my hand--you know I could! But you have appealed to my friendship, and the duties of friendship are sacred to me. See! I trample my base curiosity under my feet. My exalted sentiments lift me above it. Recognise them, Percival! imitate them, Percival! Shake hands--I forgive you."

His voice faltered over the last words--faltered, as if he were actually shedding tears!

Sir Percival confusedly attempted to excuse himself, but the Count was too magnanimous to listen to him.

"No!" he said. "When my friend has wounded me, I can pardon him without apologies. Tell me, in plain words, do you want my help?"

"Yes, badly enough."

"And you can ask for it without compromising yourself?"

"I can try, at any rate."

"Try, then."

"Well, this is how it stands:--I told you to-day that I had done my best to find Anne Catherick, and failed."

"Yes, you did."

"Fosco! I'm a lost man if I DON'T find her."

"Ha! Is it so serious as that?"

A little stream of light travelled out under the verandah, and fell over the gravel-walk. The Count had taken the lamp from the inner part of the room to see his friend clearly by the light of it.

"Yes!" he said. "Your face speaks the truth this time. Serious, indeed--as serious as the money matters themselves."

"More serious. As true as I sit here, more serious!"

The light disappeared again and the talk went on.

"I showed you the letter to my wife that Anne Catherick hid in the sand," Sir Percival continued. "There's no boasting in that letter, Fosco--she DOES know the Secret."

"Say as little as possible, Percival, in my presence, of the Secret. Does she know it from you?"

"No, from her mother."

"Two women in possession of your private mind--bad, bad, bad, my friend! One question here, before we go any farther. The motive of your shutting up the daughter in the asylum is now plain enough to me, but the manner of her escape is not quite so clear. Do you suspect the people in charge of her of closing their eyes purposely, at the instance of some enemy who could afford to make it worth their while?"

"No, she was the best-behaved patient they had--and, like fools, they trusted her. She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large--if you understand that?"

"I do understand it. Now, Percival, come at once to the point, and then I shall know what to do. Where is the danger of your position at the present moment?"

"Anne Catherick is in this neighbourhood, and in communication with Lady Glyde--there's the danger, plain enough. Who can read the letter she hid in the sand, and not see that my wife is in possession of the Secret, deny it as she may?"

"One moment, Percival. If Lady Glyde does know the Secret, she must know also that it is a compromising secret for you. As your wife, surely it is her

interest to keep it?"

"Is it? I'm coming to that. It might be her interest if she cared two straws about me. But I happen to be an encumbrance in the way of another man. She was in love with him before she married me--she's in love with him now--an infernal vagabond of a drawing-master, named Hartright."

"My dear friend! what is there extraordinary in that? They are all in love with some other man. Who gets the first of a woman's heart? In all my experience I have never yet met with the man who was Number One. Number Two, sometimes. Number Three, Four, Five, often. Number One, never! He exists, of course--but I have not met with him."

"Wait! I haven't done yet. Who do you think helped Anne Catherick to get the start, when the people from the mad-house were after her? Hartright. Who do you think saw her again in Cumberland? Hartright. Both times he spoke to her alone. Stop! don't interrupt me. The scoundrel's as sweet on my wife as she is on him. He knows the Secret, and she knows the Secret. Once let them both get together again, and it's her interest and his interest to turn their information against me."

"Gently, Percival--gently! Are you insensible to the virtue of Lady Glyde?"

"That for the virtue of Lady Glyde! I believe in nothing about her but her money. Don't you see how the case stands? She might be harmless enough by herself; but if she and that vagabond Hartright----"

"Yes, yes, I see. Where is Mr. Hartright?"

"Out of the country. If he means to keep a whole skin on his bones, I recommend him not to come back in a hurry."

"Are you sure he is out of the country?"

"Certain. I had him watched from the time he left Cumberland to the time he sailed. Oh, I've been careful, I can tell you! Anne Catherick lived with some people at a farmhouse near Limmeridge. I went there myself, after she had given me the slip, and made sure that they knew nothing. I gave her mother a form of letter to write to Miss Halcombe, exonerating me from any bad motive in putting her under restraint. I've spent, I'm afraid to say how much, in trying to trace her, and in spite of it all, she turns up here and escapes me on my own property! How do I know who else may see her, who else may speak to her? That prying scoundrel, Hartright, may come back

without my knowing it, and may make use of her to-morrow----"

"Not he, Percival! While I am on the spot, and while that woman is in the neighbourhood, I will answer for our laying hands on her before Mr. Hartright--even if he does come back. I see! yes, yes, I see! The finding of Anne Catherick is the first necessity--make your mind easy about the rest. Your wife is here, under your thumb--Miss Halcombe is inseparable from her, and is, therefore, under your thumb also--and Mr. Hartright is out of the country. This invisible Anne of yours is all we have to think of for the present. You have made your inquiries?"

"Yes. I have been to her mother, I have ransacked the village--and all to no purpose."

"Is her mother to be depended on?"

"Yes."

"She has told your secret once."

"She won't tell it again."

"Why not? Are her own interests concerned in keeping it, as well as yours?"

"Yes--deeply concerned."

"I am glad to hear it, Percival, for your sake. Don't be discouraged, my friend. Our money matters, as I told you, leave me plenty of time to turn round in, and I may search for Anne Catherick to-morrow to better purpose than you. One last question before we go to bed."

"What is it?"

"It is this. When I went to the boat-house to tell Lady Glyde that the little difficulty of her signature was put off, accident took me there in time to see a strange woman parting in a very suspicious manner from your wife. But accident did not bring me near enough to see this same woman's face plainly. I must know how to recognise our invisible Anne. What is she like?"

"Like? Come! I'll tell you in two words. She's a sickly likeness of my wife."

The chair creaked, and the pillar shook once more. The Count was on his feet again--this time in astonishment.

"What!!!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head--and there is Anne Catherick for you," answered Sir Percival.

"Are they related to each other?"

"Not a bit of it."

"And yet so like?"

"Yes, so like. What are you laughing about?"

There was no answer, and no sound of any kind. The Count was laughing in his smooth silent internal way.

"What are you laughing about?" reiterated Sir Percival.

"Perhaps at my own fancies, my good friend. Allow me my Italian humour--do I not come of the illustrious nation which invented the exhibition of Punch? Well, well, well, I shall know Anne Catherick when I see her--and so enough for to-night. Make your mind easy, Percival. Sleep, my son, the sleep of the just, and see what I will do for you when daylight comes to help us both. I have my projects and my plans here in my big head. You shall pay those bills and find Anne Catherick--my sacred word of honour on it, but you shall! Am I a friend to be treasured in the best corner of your heart, or am I not? Am I worth those loans of money which you so delicately reminded me of a little while since? Whatever you do, never wound me in my sentiments any more. Recognise them, Percival! imitate them, Percival! I forgive you again--I shake hands again. Good-night!"

Not another word was spoken. I heard the Count close the library door. I heard Sir Percival barring up the window-shutters. It had been raining, raining all the time. I was cramped by my position and chilled to the bones. When I first tried to move, the effort was so painful to me that I was obliged to desist. I tried a second time, and succeeded in rising to my knees on the wet roof.

As I crept to the wall, and raised myself against it, I looked back, and saw the window of the Count's dressing-room gleam into light. My sinking courage flickered up in me again, and kept my eyes fixed on his window, as I stole my way back, step by step, past the wall of the house.

The clock struck the quarter after one, when I laid my hands on the window-sill of my own room. I had seen nothing and heard nothing which could lead me to suppose that my retreat had been discovered.

X

June 20th.--Eight o'clock. The sun is shining in a clear sky. I have not been near my bed--I have not once closed my weary wakeful eyes. From the same window at which I looked out into the darkness of last night, I look out now at the bright stillness of the morning.

I count the hours that have passed since I escaped to the shelter of this room by my own sensations--and those hours seem like weeks.

How short a time, and yet how long to ME--since I sank down in the darkness, here, on the floor--drenched to the skin, cramped in every limb, cold to the bones, a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature.

I hardly know when I roused myself. I hardly know when I groped my way back to the bedroom, and lighted the candle, and searched (with a strange ignorance, at first, of where to look for them) for dry clothes to warm me. The doing of these things is in my mind, but not the time when they were done.

Can I even remember when the chilled, cramped feeling left me, and the throbbing heat came in its place?

Surely it was before the sun rose? Yes, I heard the clock strike three. I remember the time by the sudden brightness and clearness, the feverish strain and excitement of all my faculties which came with it. I remember my resolution to control myself, to wait patiently hour after hour, till the chance offered of removing Laura from this horrible place, without the danger of immediate discovery and pursuit. I remember the persuasion settling itself in my mind that the words those two men had said to each other would furnish us, not only with our justification for leaving the house, but with our weapons of defence against them as well. I recall the impulse that awakened in me to preserve those words in writing, exactly as they were spoken, while the time was my own, and while my memory vividly retained them. All this I remember plainly: there is no confusion in my head yet. The coming in here from the bedroom, with my pen and ink and paper, before sunrise--the sitting down at the widely-opened window to get all the air I could to cool me--the ceaseless writing, faster and faster, hotter and hotter, driving on more and more wakefully, all through the dreadful interval before the house was astir again--how clearly I recall it, from the beginning by candle-light, to the end on the page before this, in the sunshine of the

new day!

Why do I sit here still? Why do I weary my hot eyes and my burning head by writing more? Why not lie down and rest myself, and try to quench the fever that consumes me, in sleep?

I dare not attempt it. A fear beyond all other fears has got possession of me. I am afraid of this heat that parches my skin. I am afraid of the creeping and throbbing that I feel in my head. If I lie down now, how do I know that I may have the sense and the strength to rise again?

Oh, the rain, the rain--the cruel rain that chilled me last night!

Nine o'clock. Was it nine struck, or eight? Nine, surely? I am shivering again--shivering, from head to foot, in the summer air. Have I been sitting here asleep? I don't know what I have been doing.

Oh, my God! am I going to be ill?

Ill, at such a time as this!

My head--I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together. I see the words. Laura--I can write Laura, and see I write it. Eight or nine--which was it?

So cold, so cold--oh, that rain last night!--and the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head----

* * * * * * * * * *

Note [At this place the entry in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen. The last marks on the paper bear some resemblance to the first two letters (L and A) of the name of Lady Glyde.

On the next page of the Diary, another entry appears. It is in a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular, and the date is "June the 21st." It contains these lines--]

POSTSCRIPT BY A SINCERE FRIEND

The illness of our excellent Miss Halcombe has afforded me the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure.

I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary.

There are many hundred pages here. I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, delighted me.

To a man of my sentiments it is unspeakably gratifying to be able to say this.

Admirable woman!

I allude to Miss Halcombe.

Stupendous effort!

I refer to the Diary.

Yes! these pages are amazing. The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian. The presentation of my own character is masterly in the extreme. I certify, with my whole heart, to the fidelity of the portrait. I feel how vivid an impression I must have produced to have been painted in such strong, such rich, such massive colours as these. I lament afresh the cruel necessity which sets our interests at variance, and opposes us to each other. Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe--how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME.

The sentiments which animate my heart assure me that the lines I have just written express a Profound Truth.

Those sentiments exalt me above all merely personal considerations. I bear witness, in the most disinterested manner, to the excellence of the stratagem by which this unparalleled woman surprised the private interview between Percival and myself--also to the marvellous accuracy of her report of the whole conversation from its beginning to its end.

Those sentiments have induced me to offer to the unimpressionable doctor who attends on her my vast knowledge of chemistry, and my luminous experience of the more subtle resources which medical and magnetic science have placed at the disposal of mankind. He has hitherto declined to avail himself of my assistance. Miserable man!

Finally, those sentiments dictate the lines--grateful, sympathetic, paternal lines--which appear in this place. I close the book. My strict sense of propriety restores it (by the hands of my wife) to its place on the writer's table. Events are hurrying me away. Circumstances are guiding me to serious issues. Vast perspectives of success unroll themselves before my eyes. I accomplish my destiny with a calmness which is terrible to myself. Nothing but the homage of my admiration is my own. I deposit it with respectful tenderness at the feet of Miss Halcombe.

I breathe my wishes for her recovery.

I condole with her on the inevitable failure of every plan that she has formed for her sister's benefit. At the same time, I entreat her to believe that the information which I have derived from her Diary will in no respect help me to contribute to that failure. It simply confirms the plan of conduct which I had previously arranged. I have to thank these pages for awakening the finest sensibilities in my nature--nothing more.

To a person of similar sensibility this simple assertion will explain and excuse everything.

Miss Halcombe is a person of similar sensibility.

In that persuasion I sign myself, Fosco.

THE STORY CONTINUED BY FREDERICK FAIRLIE, ESQ., OF LIMMERIDGE HOUSE[2]

[2] The manner in which Mr. Fairlie's Narrative and other Narratives that are shortly to follow it, were originally obtained, forms the subject of an explanation which will appear at a later period.

It is the grand misfortune of my life that nobody will let me alone.

Why--I ask everybody--why worry ME? Nobody answers that question, and

nobody lets me alone. Relatives, friends, and strangers all combine to annoy me. What have I done? I ask myself, I ask my servant, Louis, fifty times a day--what have I done? Neither of us can tell. Most extraordinary!

The last annoyance that has assailed me is the annoyance of being called upon to write this Narrative. Is a man in my state of nervous wretchedness capable of writing narratives? When I put this extremely reasonable objection, I am told that certain very serious events relating to my niece have happened within my experience, and that I am the fit person to describe them on that account. I am threatened if I fail to exert myself in the manner required, with consequences which I cannot so much as think of without perfect prostration. There is really no need to threaten me. Shattered by my miserable health and my family troubles, I am incapable of resistance. If you insist, you take your unjust advantage of me, and I give way immediately. I will endeavour to remember what I can (under protest), and to write what I can (also under protest), and what I can't remember and can't write, Louis must remember and write for me. He is an ass, and I am an invalid, and we are likely to make all sorts of mistakes between us. How humiliating!

I am told to remember dates. Good heavens! I never did such a thing in my life--how am I to begin now?

I have asked Louis. He is not quite such an ass as I have hitherto supposed. He remembers the date of the event, within a week or two--and I remember the name of the person. The date was towards the end of June, or the beginning of July, and the name (in my opinion a remarkably vulgar one) was Fanny.

At the end of June, or the beginning of July, then, I was reclining in my customary state, surrounded by the various objects of Art which I have collected about me to improve the taste of the barbarous people in my neighbourhood. That is to say, I had the photographs of my pictures, and prints, and coins, and so forth, all about me, which I intend, one of these days, to present (the photographs, I mean, if the clumsy English language will let me mean anything) to present to the institution at Carlisle (horrid place!), with a view to improving the tastes of the members (Goths and Vandals to a man). It might be supposed that a gentleman who was in course of conferring a great national benefit on his countrymen was the last gentleman in the world to be unfeelingly worried about private difficulties and family affairs. Quite a mistake, I assure you, in my case.

However, there I was, reclining, with my art-treasures about me, and

wanting a quiet morning. Because I wanted a quiet morning, of course Louis came in. It was perfectly natural that I should inquire what the deuce he meant by making his appearance when I had not rung my bell. I seldom swear--it is such an ungentlemanlike habit--but when Louis answered by a grin, I think it was also perfectly natural that I should damn him for grinning. At any rate, I did.

This rigorous mode of treatment, I have observed, invariably brings persons in the lower class of life to their senses. It brought Louis to HIS senses. He was so obliging as to leave off grinning, and inform me that a Young Person was outside wanting to see me. He added (with the odious talkativeness of servants), that her name was Fanny.

"Who is Fanny?"

"Lady Glyde's maid, sir."

"What does Lady Glyde's maid want with me?"

"A letter, sir----"

"Take it."

"She refuses to give it to anybody but you, sir."

"Who sends the letter?"

"Miss Halcombe, sir."

The moment I heard Miss Halcombe's name I gave up. It is a habit of mine always to give up to Miss Halcombe. I find, by experience, that it saves noise. I gave up on this occasion. Dear Marian!

"Let Lady Glyde's maid come in, Louis. Stop! Do her shoes creak?"

I was obliged to ask the question. Creaking shoes invariably upset me for the day. I was resigned to see the Young Person, but I was NOT resigned to let the Young Person's shoes upset me. There is a limit even to my endurance.

Louis affirmed distinctly that her shoes were to be depended upon. I waved my hand. He introduced her. Is it necessary to say that she expressed her sense of embarrassment by shutting up her mouth and breathing through

her nose? To the student of female human nature in the lower orders, surely not.

Let me do the girl justice. Her shoes did NOT creak. But why do Young Persons in service all perspire at the hands? Why have they all got fat noses and hard cheeks? And why are their faces so sadly unfinished, especially about the corners of the eyelids? I am not strong enough to think deeply myself on any subject, but I appeal to professional men, who are. Why have we no variety in our breed of Young Persons?

"You have a letter for me, from Miss Halcombe? Put it down on the table, please, and don't upset anything. How is Miss Halcombe?"

"Very well, thank you, sir."

"And Lady Glyde?"

I received no answer. The Young Person's face became more unfinished than ever, and I think she began to cry. I certainly saw something moist about her eyes. Tears or perspiration? Louis (whom I have just consulted) is inclined to think, tears. He is in her class of life, and he ought to know best. Let us say, tears.

Except when the refining process of Art judiciously removes from them all resemblance to Nature, I distinctly object to tears. Tears are scientifically described as a Secretion. I can understand that a secretion may be healthy or unhealthy, but I cannot see the interest of a secretion from a sentimental point of view. Perhaps my own secretions being all wrong together, I am a little prejudiced on the subject. No matter. I behaved, on this occasion, with all possible propriety and feeling. I closed my eyes and said to Louis--

"Endeavour to ascertain what she means."

Louis endeavoured, and the Young Person endeavoured. They succeeded in confusing each other to such an extent that I am bound in common gratitude to say, they really amused me. I think I shall send for them again when I am in low spirits. I have just mentioned this idea to Louis. Strange to say, it seems to make him uncomfortable. Poor devil!

Surely I am not expected to repeat my niece's maid's explanation of her tears, interpreted in the English of my Swiss valet? The thing is manifestly impossible. I can give my own impressions and feelings perhaps. Will that do as well? Please say, Yes.

My idea is that she began by telling me (through Louis) that her master had dismissed her from her mistress's service. (Observe, throughout, the strange irrelevancy of the Young Person. Was it my fault that she had lost her place?) On her dismissal, she had gone to the inn to sleep. (I don't keep the inn--why mention it to ME?) Between six o'clock and seven Miss Halcombe had come to say good-bye, and had given her two letters, one for me, and one for a gentleman in London. (I am not a gentleman in London--hang the gentleman in London!) She had carefully put the two letters into her bosom (what have I to do with her bosom?); she had been very unhappy, when Miss Halcombe had gone away again; she had not had the heart to put bit or drop between her lips till it was near bedtime, and then, when it was close on nine o'clock, she had thought she should like a cup of tea. (Am I responsible for any of these vulgar fluctuations, which begin with unhappiness and end with tea?) Just as she was WARMING THE POT (I give the words on the authority of Louis, who says he knows what they mean, and wishes to explain, but I snub him on principle)--just as she was warming the pot the door opened, and she was STRUCK OF A HEAP (her own words again, and perfectly unintelligible this time to Louis, as well as to myself) by the appearance in the inn parlour of her ladyship the Countess. I give my niece's maid's description of my sister's title with a sense of the highest relish. My poor dear sister is a tiresome woman who married a foreigner. To resume: the door opened, her ladyship the Countess appeared in the parlour, and the Young Person was struck of a heap. Most remarkable!

I must really rest a little before I can get on any farther. When I have reclined for a few minutes, with my eyes closed, and when Louis has refreshed my poor aching temples with a little eau-de-Cologne, I may be able to proceed.

Her ladyship the Countess----

No. I am able to proceed, but not to sit up. I will recline and dictate. Louis has a horrid accent, but he knows the language, and can write. How very convenient!

Her ladyship, the Countess, explained her unexpected appearance at the inn by telling Fanny that she had come to bring one or two little messages which Miss Halcombe in her hurry had forgotten. The Young Person thereupon waited anxiously to hear what the messages were, but the Countess seemed disinclined to mention them (so like my sister's tiresome way!) until Fanny had had her tea. Her ladyship was surprisingly kind and

thoughtful about it (extremely unlike my sister), and said, "I am sure, my poor girl, you must want your tea. We can let the messages wait till afterwards. Come, come, if nothing else will put you at your ease, I'll make the tea and have a cup with you." I think those were the words, as reported excitably, in my presence, by the Young Person. At any rate, the Countess insisted on making the tea, and carried her ridiculous ostentation of humility so far as to take one cup herself, and to insist on the girl's taking the other. The girl drank the tea, and according to her own account, solemnised the extraordinary occasion five minutes afterwards by fainting dead away for the first time in her life. Here again I use her own words. Louis thinks they were accompanied by an increased secretion of tears. I can't say myself. The effort of listening being quite as much as I could manage, my eyes were closed.

Where did I leave off? Ah, yes--she fainted after drinking a cup of tea with the Countess--a proceeding which might have interested me if I had been her medical man, but being nothing of the sort I felt bored by hearing of it, nothing more. When she came to herself in half an hour's time she was on the sofa, and nobody was with her but the landlady. The Countess, finding it too late to remain any longer at the inn, had gone away as soon as the girl showed signs of recovering, and the landlady had been good enough to help her upstairs to bed.

Left by herself, she had felt in her bosom (I regret the necessity of referring to this part of the subject a second time), and had found the two letters there quite safe, but strangely crumpled. She had been giddy in the night, but had got up well enough to travel in the morning. She had put the letter addressed to that obtrusive stranger, the gentleman in London into the post, and had now delivered the other letter into my hands as she was told. This was the plain truth, and though she could not blame herself for any intentional neglect, she was sadly troubled in her mind, and sadly in want of a word of advice. At this point Louis thinks the secretions appeared again. Perhaps they did, but it is of infinitely greater importance to mention that at this point also I lost my patience, opened my eyes, and interfered.

"What is the purport of all this?" I inquired.

My niece's irrelevant maid stared, and stood speechless.

"Endeavour to explain," I said to my servant. "Translate me, Louis."

Louis endeavoured and translated. In other words, he descended immediately into a bottomless pit of confusion, and the Young Person

followed him down. I really don't know when I have been so amused. I left them at the bottom of the pit as long as they diverted me. When they ceased to divert me, I exerted my intelligence, and pulled them up again.

It is unnecessary to say that my interference enabled me, in due course of time, to ascertain the purport of the Young Person's remarks.

I discovered that she was uneasy in her mind, because the train of events that she had just described to me had prevented her from receiving those supplementary messages which Miss Halcombe had intrusted to the Countess to deliver. She was afraid the messages might have been of great importance to her mistress's interests. Her dread of Sir Percival had deterred her from going to Blackwater Park late at night to inquire about them, and Miss Halcombe's own directions to her, on no account to miss the train in the morning, had prevented her from waiting at the inn the next day. She was most anxious that the misfortune of her fainting-fit should not lead to the second misfortune of making her mistress think her neglectful, and she would humbly beg to ask me whether I would advise her to write her explanations and excuses to Miss Halcombe, requesting to receive the messages by letter, if it was not too late. I make no apologies for this extremely prosy paragraph. I have been ordered to write it. There are people, unaccountable as it may appear, who actually take more interest in what my niece's maid said to me on this occasion than in what I said to my niece's maid. Amusing perversity!

"I should feel very much obliged to you, sir, if you would kindly tell me what I had better do," remarked the Young Person.

"Let things stop as they are," I said, adapting my language to my listener. "I invariably let things stop as they are. Yes. Is that all?"

"If you think it would be a liberty in me, sir, to write, of course I wouldn't venture to do so. But I am so very anxious to do all I can to serve my mistress faithfully----"

People in the lower class of life never know when or how to go out of a room. They invariably require to be helped out by their betters. I thought it high time to help the Young Person out. I did it with two judicious words--

"Good-morning."

Something outside or inside this singular girl suddenly creaked. Louis, who was looking at her (which I was not), says she creaked when she curtseyed.

Curious. Was it her shoes, her stays, or her bones? Louis thinks it was her stays. Most extraordinary!

As soon as I was left by myself I had a little nap--I really wanted it. When I awoke again I noticed dear Marian's letter. If I had had the least idea of what it contained I should certainly not have attempted to open it. Being, unfortunately for myself, quite innocent of all suspicion, I read the letter. It immediately upset me for the day.

I am, by nature, one of the most easy-tempered creatures that ever lived--I make allowances for everybody, and I take offence at nothing. But as I have before remarked, there are limits to my endurance. I laid down Marian's letter, and felt myself--justly felt myself--an injured man.

I am about to make a remark. It is, of course, applicable to the very serious matter now under notice, or I should not allow it to appear in this place.

Nothing, in my opinion, sets the odious selfishness of mankind in such a repulsively vivid light as the treatment, in all classes of society, which the Single people receive at the hands of the Married people. When you have once shown yourself too considerate and self-denying to add a family of your own to an already overcrowded population, you are vindictively marked out by your married friends, who have no similar consideration and no similar self-denial, as the recipient of half their conjugal troubles, and the born friend of all their children. Husbands and wives TALK of the cares of matrimony, and bachelors and spinsters BEAR them. Take my own case. I considerately remain single, and my poor dear brother Philip inconsiderately marries. What does he do when he dies? He leaves his daughter to ME. She is a sweet girl--she is also a dreadful responsibility. Why lay her on my shoulders? Because I am bound, in the harmless character of a single man, to relieve my married connections of all their own troubles. I do my best with my brother's responsibility--I marry my niece, with infinite fuss and difficulty, to the man her father wanted her to marry. She and her husband disagree, and unpleasant consequences follow. What does she do with those consequences? She transfers them to ME. Why transfer them to ME? Because I am bound, in the harmless character of a single man, to relieve my married connections of all their own troubles. Poor single people! Poor human nature!

It is quite unnecessary to say that Marian's letter threatened me. Everybody threatens me. All sorts of horrors were to fall on my devoted head if I

hesitated to turn Limmeridge House into an asylum for my niece and her misfortunes. I did hesitate, nevertheless.

I have mentioned that my usual course, hitherto, had been to submit to dear Marian, and save noise. But on this occasion, the consequences involved in her extremely inconsiderate proposal were of a nature to make me pause. If I opened Limmeridge House as an asylum to Lady Glyde, what security had I against Sir Percival Glyde's following her here in a state of violent resentment against ME for harbouring his wife? I saw such a perfect labyrinth of troubles involved in this proceeding that I determined to feel my ground, as it were. I wrote, therefore, to dear Marian to beg (as she had no husband to lay claim to her) that she would come here by herself, first, and talk the matter over with me. If she could answer my objections to my own perfect satisfaction, then I assured her that I would receive our sweet Laura with the greatest pleasure, but not otherwise.

I felt, of course, at the time, that this temporising on my part would probably end in bringing Marian here in a state of virtuous indignation, banging doors. But then, the other course of proceeding might end in bringing Sir Percival here in a state of virtuous indignation, banging doors also, and of the two indignations and bangings I preferred Marian's, because I was used to her. Accordingly I despatched the letter by return of post. It gained me time, at all events--and, oh dear me! what a point that was to begin with.

When I am totally prostrated (did I mention that I was totally prostrated by Marian's letter?) it always takes me three days to get up again. I was very unreasonable--I expected three days of quiet. Of course I didn't get them.

The third day's post brought me a most impertinent letter from a person with whom I was totally unacquainted. He described himself as the acting partner of our man of business--our dear, pig-headed old Gilmore--and he informed me that he had lately received, by the post, a letter addressed to him in Miss Halcombe's handwriting. On opening the envelope, he had discovered, to his astonishment, that it contained nothing but a blank sheet of note-paper. This circumstance appeared to him so suspicious (as suggesting to his restless legal mind that the letter had been tampered with) that he had at once written to Miss Halcombe, and had received no answer by return of post. In this difficulty, instead of acting like a sensible man and letting things take their proper course, his next absurd proceeding, on his own showing, was to pester me by writing to inquire if I knew anything about it. What the deuce should I know about it? Why alarm me as well as himself? I wrote back to that effect. It was one of my keenest letters. I have

produced nothing with a sharper epistolary edge to it since I tendered his dismissal in writing to that extremely troublesome person, Mr. Walter Hartright.

My letter produced its effect. I heard nothing more from the lawyer.

This perhaps was not altogether surprising. But it was certainly a remarkable circumstance that no second letter reached me from Marian, and that no warning signs appeared of her arrival. Her unexpected absence did me amazing good. It was so very soothing and pleasant to infer (as I did of course) that my married connections had made it up again. Five days of undisturbed tranquillity, of delicious single blessedness, quite restored me. On the sixth day I felt strong enough to send for my photographer, and to set him at work again on the presentation copies of my art-treasures, with a view, as I have already mentioned, to the improvement of taste in this barbarous neighbourhood. I had just dismissed him to his workshop, and had just begun coquetting with my coins, when Louis suddenly made his appearance with a card in his hand.

"Another Young Person?" I said. "I won't see her. In my state of health Young Persons disagree with me. Not at home."

"It is a gentleman this time, sir."

A gentleman of course made a difference. I looked at the card.

Gracious Heaven! my tiresome sister's foreign husband, Count Fosco.

Is it necessary to say what my first impression was when I looked at my visitor's card? Surely not! My sister having married a foreigner, there was but one impression that any man in his senses could possibly feel. Of course the Count had come to borrow money of me.

"Louis," I said, "do you think he would go away if you gave him five shillings?"

Louis looked quite shocked. He surprised me inexpressibly by declaring that my sister's foreign husband was dressed superbly, and looked the picture of prosperity. Under these circumstances my first impression altered to a certain extent. I now took it for granted that the Count had matrimonial difficulties of his own to contend with, and that he had come,

like the rest of the family, to cast them all on my shoulders.

"Did he mention his business?" I asked.

"Count Fosco said he had come here, sir, because Miss Halcombe was unable to leave Blackwater Park."

Fresh troubles, apparently. Not exactly his own, as I had supposed, but dear Marian's. Troubles, anyway. Oh dear!

"Show him in," I said resignedly.

The Count's first appearance really startled me. He was such an alarmingly large person that I quite trembled. I felt certain that he would shake the floor and knock down my art-treasures. He did neither the one nor the other. He was refreshingly dressed in summer costume--his manner was delightfully self-possessed and quiet--he had a charming smile. My first impression of him was highly favourable. It is not creditable to my penetration--as the sequel will show--to acknowledge this, but I am a naturally candid man, and I DO acknowledge it notwithstanding.

"Allow me to present myself, Mr. Fairlie," he said. "I come from Blackwater Park, and I have the honour and the happiness of being Madame Fosco's husband. Let me take my first and last advantage of that circumstance by entreating you not to make a stranger of me. I beg you will not disturb yourself--I beg you will not move."

"You are very good," I replied. "I wish I was strong enough to get up. Charmed to see you at Limmeridge. Please take a chair."

"I am afraid you are suffering to-day," said the Count.

"As usual," I said. "I am nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man."

"I have studied many subjects in my time," remarked this sympathetic person. "Among others the inexhaustible subject of nerves. May I make a suggestion, at once the simplest and the most profound? Will you let me alter the light in your room?"

"Certainly--if you will be so very kind as not to let any of it in on me."

He walked to the window. Such a contrast to dear Marian! so extremely

considerate in all his movements!

"Light," he said, in that delightfully confidential tone which is so soothing to an invalid, "is the first essential. Light stimulates, nourishes, preserves. You can no more do without it, Mr. Fairlie, than if you were a flower. Observe. Here, where you sit, I close the shutters to compose you. There, where you do NOT sit, I draw up the blind and let in the invigorating sun. Admit the light into your room if you cannot bear it on yourself. Light, sir, is the grand decree of Providence. You accept Providence with your own restrictions. Accept light on the same terms."

I thought this very convincing and attentive. He had taken me in up to that point about the light, he had certainly taken me in.

"You see me confused," he said, returning to his place--"on my word of honour, Mr. Fairlie, you see me confused in your presence."

"Shocked to hear it, I am sure. May I inquire why?"

"Sir, can I enter this room (where you sit a sufferer), and see you surrounded by these admirable objects of Art, without discovering that you are a man whose feelings are acutely impressionable, whose sympathies are perpetually alive? Tell me, can I do this?"

If I had been strong enough to sit up in my chair I should, of course, have bowed. Not being strong enough, I smiled my acknowledgments instead. It did just as well, we both understood one another.

"Pray follow my train of thought," continued the Count. "I sit here, a man of refined sympathies myself, in the presence of another man of refined sympathies also. I am conscious of a terrible necessity for lacerating those sympathies by referring to domestic events of a very melancholy kind. What is the inevitable consequence? I have done myself the honour of pointing it out to you already. I sit confused."

Was it at this point that I began to suspect he was going to bore me? I rather think it was.

"Is it absolutely necessary to refer to these unpleasant matters?" I inquired. "In our homely English phrase, Count Fosco, won't they keep?"

The Count, with the most alarming solemnity, sighed and shook his head.

"Must I really hear them?"

He shrugged his shoulders (it was the first foreign thing he had done since he had been in the room), and looked at me in an unpleasantly penetrating manner. My instincts told me that I had better close my eyes. I obeyed my instincts.

"Please break it gently," I pleaded. "Anybody dead?"

"Dead!" cried the Count, with unnecessary foreign fierceness. "Mr. Fairlie, your national composure terrifies me. In the name of Heaven, what have I said or done to make you think me the messenger of death?"

"Pray accept my apologies," I answered. "You have said and done nothing. I make it a rule in these distressing cases always to anticipate the worst. It breaks the blow by meeting it half-way, and so on. Inexpressibly relieved, I am sure, to hear that nobody is dead. Anybody ill?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him. Was he very yellow when he came in, or had he turned very yellow in the last minute or two? I really can't say, and I can't ask Louis, because he was not in the room at the time.

"Anybody ill?" I repeated, observing that my national composure still appeared to affect him.

"That is part of my bad news, Mr. Fairlie. Yes. Somebody is ill."

"Grieved, I am sure. Which of them is it?"

"To my profound sorrow, Miss Halcombe. Perhaps you were in some degree prepared to hear this? Perhaps when you found that Miss Halcombe did not come here by herself, as you proposed, and did not write a second time, your affectionate anxiety may have made you fear that she was ill?"

I have no doubt my affectionate anxiety had led to that melancholy apprehension at some time or other, but at the moment my wretched memory entirely failed to remind me of the circumstance. However, I said yes, in justice to myself. I was much shocked. It was so very uncharacteristic of such a robust person as dear Marian to be ill, that I could only suppose she had met with an accident. A horse, or a false step on the stairs, or something of that sort.

"Is it serious?" I asked.

"Serious--beyond a doubt," he replied. "Dangerous--I hope and trust not. Miss Halcombe unhappily exposed herself to be wetted through by a heavy rain. The cold that followed was of an aggravated kind, and it has now brought with it the worst consequence--fever."

When I heard the word fever, and when I remembered at the same moment that the unscrupulous person who was now addressing me had just come from Blackwater Park, I thought I should have fainted on the spot.

"Good God!" I said. "Is it infectious?"

"Not at present," he answered, with detestable composure. "It may turn to infection--but no such deplorable complication had taken place when I left Blackwater Park. I have felt the deepest interest in the case, Mr. Fairlie--I have endeavoured to assist the regular medical attendant in watching it--accept my personal assurances of the uninfectious nature of the fever when I last saw it."

Accept his assurances! I never was farther from accepting anything in my life. I would not have believed him on his oath. He was too yellow to be believed. He looked like a walking-West-Indian-epidemic. He was big enough to carry typhus by the ton, and to dye the very carpet he walked on with scarlet fever. In certain emergencies my mind is remarkably soon made up. I instantly determined to get rid of him.

"You will kindly excuse an invalid," I said--"but long conferences of any kind invariably upset me. May I beg to know exactly what the object is to which I am indebted for the honour of your visit?"

I fervently hoped that this remarkably broad hint would throw him off his balance--confuse him--reduce him to polite apologies--in short, get him out of the room. On the contrary, it only settled him in his chair. He became additionally solemn, and dignified, and confidential. He held up two of his horrid fingers and gave me another of his unpleasantly penetrating looks. What was I to do? I was not strong enough to quarrel with him. Conceive my situation, if you please. Is language adequate to describe it? I think not.

"The objects of my visit," he went on, quite irrepressibly, "are numbered on my fingers. They are two. First, I come to bear my testimony, with profound sorrow, to the lamentable disagreements between Sir Percival and Lady Glyde. I am Sir Percival's oldest friend--I am related to Lady Glyde by marriage--I am an eye-witness of all that has happened at Blackwater Park.

In those three capacities I speak with authority, with confidence, with honourable regret. Sir, I inform you, as the head of Lady Glyde's family, that Miss Halcombe has exaggerated nothing in the letter which she wrote to your address. I affirm that the remedy which that admirable lady has proposed is the only remedy that will spare you the horrors of public scandal. A temporary separation between husband and wife is the one peaceable solution of this difficulty. Part them for the present, and when all causes of irritation are removed, I, who have now the honour of addressing you--I will undertake to bring Sir Percival to reason. Lady Glyde is innocent, Lady Glyde is injured, but--follow my thought here!--she is, on that very account (I say it with shame), the cause of irritation while she remains under her husband's roof. No other house can receive her with propriety but yours. I invite you to open it."

Cool. Here was a matrimonial hailstorm pouring in the South of England, and I was invited, by a man with fever in every fold of his coat, to come out from the North of England and take my share of the pelting. I tried to put the point forcibly, just as I have put it here. The Count deliberately lowered one of his horrid fingers, kept the other up, and went on--rode over me, as it were, without even the common coach-manlike attention of crying "Hi!" before he knocked me down.

"Follow my thought once more, if you please," he resumed. "My first object you have heard. My second object in coming to this house is to do what Miss Halcombe's illness has prevented her from doing for herself. My large experience is consulted on all difficult matters at Blackwater Park, and my friendly advice was requested on the interesting subject of your letter to Miss Halcombe. I understood at once--for my sympathies are your sympathies--why you wished to see her here before you pledged yourself to inviting Lady Glyde. You are most right, sir, in hesitating to receive the wife until you are quite certain that the husband will not exert his authority to reclaim her. I agree to that. I also agree that such delicate explanations as this difficulty involves are not explanations which can be properly disposed of by writing only. My presence here (to my own great inconvenience) is the proof that I speak sincerely. As for the explanations themselves, I--Fosco--I, who know Sir Percival much better than Miss Halcombe knows him, affirm to you, on my honour and my word, that he will not come near this house, or attempt to communicate with this house, while his wife is living in it. His affairs are embarrassed. Offer him his freedom by means of the absence of Lady Glyde. I promise you he will take his freedom, and go back to the Continent at the earliest moment when he can get away. Is this clear to you as crystal? Yes, it is. Have you questions to address to me? Be it so, I am here to answer. Ask, Mr. Fairlie--oblige me by asking to your heart's

content."

He had said so much already in spite of me, and he looked so dreadfully capable of saying a great deal more also in spite of me, that I declined his amiable invitation in pure self-defence.

"Many thanks," I replied. "I am sinking fast. In my state of health I must take things for granted. Allow me to do so on this occasion. We quite understand each other. Yes. Much obliged, I am sure, for your kind interference. If I ever get better, and ever have a second opportunity of improving our acquaintance--"

He got up. I thought he was going. No. More talk, more time for the development of infectious influences--in my room, too--remember that, in my room!

"One moment yet," he said, "one moment before I take my leave. I ask permission at parting to impress on you an urgent necessity. It is this, sir. You must not think of waiting till Miss Halcombe recovers before you receive Lady Glyde. Miss Halcombe has the attendance of the doctor, of the housekeeper at Blackwater Park, and of an experienced nurse as well--three persons for whose capacity and devotion I answer with my life. I tell you that. I tell you, also, that the anxiety and alarm of her sister's illness has already affected the health and spirits of Lady Glyde, and has made her totally unfit to be of use in the sick-room. Her position with her husband grows more and more deplorable and dangerous every day. If you leave her any longer at Blackwater Park, you do nothing whatever to hasten her sister's recovery, and at the same time, you risk the public scandal, which you and I, and all of us, are bound in the sacred interests of the family to avoid. With all my soul, I advise you to remove the serious responsibility of delay from your own shoulders by writing to Lady Glyde to come here at once. Do your affectionate, your honourable, your inevitable duty, and whatever happens in the future, no one can lay the blame on you. I speak from my large experience--I offer my friendly advice. Is it accepted--Yes, or No?"

I looked at him--merely looked at him--with my sense of his amazing assurance, and my dawning resolution to ring for Louis and have him shown out of the room expressed in every line of my face. It is perfectly incredible, but quite true, that my face did not appear to produce the slightest impression on him. Born without nerves--evidently born without nerves.

"You hesitate?" he said. "Mr. Fairlie! I understand that hesitation. You object--see, sir, how my sympathies look straight down into your thoughts!--you object that Lady Glyde is not in health and not in spirits to take the long journey, from Hampshire to this place, by herself. Her own maid is removed from her, as you know, and of other servants fit to travel with her, from one end of England to another, there are none at Blackwater Park. You object, again, that she cannot comfortably stop and rest in London, on her way here, because she cannot comfortably go alone to a public hotel where she is a total stranger. In one breath, I grant both objections--in another breath, I remove them. Follow me, if you please, for the last time. It was my intention, when I returned to England with Sir Percival, to settle myself in the neighbourhood of London. That purpose has just been happily accomplished. I have taken, for six months, a little furnished house in the quarter called St. John's Wood. Be so obliging as to keep this fact in your mind, and observe the programme I now propose. Lady Glyde travels to London (a short journey)--I myself meet her at the station--I take her to rest and sleep at my house, which is also the house of her aunt--when she is restored I escort her to the station again--she travels to this place, and her own maid (who is now under your roof) receives her at the carriage-door. Here is comfort consulted--here are the interests of propriety consulted--here is your own duty--duty of hospitality, sympathy, protection, to an unhappy lady in need of all three--smoothed and made easy, from the beginning to the end. I cordially invite you, sir, to second my efforts in the sacred interests of the family. I seriously advise you to write, by my hands, offering the hospitality of your house (and heart), and the hospitality of my house (and heart), to that injured and unfortunate lady whose cause I plead to-day."

He waved his horrid hand at me--he struck his infectious breast--he addressed me oratorically, as if I was laid up in the House of Commons. It was high time to take a desperate course of some sort. It was also high time to send for Louis, and adopt the precaution of fumigating the room.

In this trying emergency an idea occurred to me--an inestimable idea which, so to speak, killed two intrusive birds with one stone. I determined to get rid of the Count's tiresome eloquence, and of Lady Glyde's tiresome troubles, by complying with this odious foreigner's request, and writing the letter at once. There was not the least danger of the invitation being accepted, for there was not the least chance that Laura would consent to leave Blackwater Park while Marian was lying there ill. How this charmingly convenient obstacle could have escaped the officious penetration of the Count, it was impossible to conceive--but it HAD escaped him. My dread that he might yet discover it, if I allowed him any more time to think,

stimulated me to such an amazing degree, that I struggled into a sitting position--seized, really seized, the writing materials by my side, and produced the letter as rapidly as if I had been a common clerk in an office. "Dearest Laura, Please come, whenever you like. Break the journey by sleeping in London at your aunt's house. Grieved to hear of dear Marian's illness. Ever affectionately yours." I handed these lines, at arm's length, to the Count--I sank back in my chair--I said, "Excuse me--I am entirely prostrated--I can do no more. Will you rest and lunch downstairs? Love to all, and sympathy, and so on. Good-morning."

He made another speech--the man was absolutely inexhaustible. I closed my eyes--I endeavoured to hear as little as possible. In spite of my endeavours I was obliged to hear a great deal. My sister's endless husband congratulated himself, and congratulated me, on the result of our interview--he mentioned a great deal more about his sympathies and mine--he deplored my miserable health--he offered to write me a prescription--he impressed on me the necessity of not forgetting what he had said about the importance of light--he accepted my obliging invitation to rest and lunch--he recommended me to expect Lady Glyde in two or three days' time--he begged my permission to look forward to our next meeting, instead of paining himself and paining me, by saying farewell--he added a great deal more, which, I rejoice to think, I did not attend to at the time, and do not remember now. I heard his sympathetic voice travelling away from me by degrees--but, large as he was, I never heard him. He had the negative merit of being absolutely noiseless. I don't know when he opened the door, or when he shut it. I ventured to make use of my eyes again, after an interval of silence--and he was gone.

I rang for Louis, and retired to my bathroom. Tepid water, strengthened with aromatic vinegar, for myself, and copious fumigation for my study, were the obvious precautions to take, and of course I adopted them. I rejoice to say they proved successful. I enjoyed my customary siesta. I awoke moist and cool.

My first inquiries were for the Count. Had we really got rid of him? Yes--he had gone away by the afternoon train. Had he lunched, and if so, upon what? Entirely upon fruit-tart and cream. What a man! What a digestion!

Am I expected to say anything more? I believe not. I believe I have reached the limits assigned to me. The shocking circumstances which happened at a later period did not, I am thankful to say, happen in my presence. I do

beg and entreat that nobody will be so very unfeeling as to lay any part of the blame of those circumstances on me. I did everything for the best. I am not answerable for a deplorable calamity, which it was quite impossible to foresee. I am shattered by it--I have suffered under it, as nobody else has suffered. My servant, Louis (who is really attached to me in his unintelligent way), thinks I shall never get over it. He sees me dictating at this moment, with my handkerchief to my eyes. I wish to mention, in justice to myself, that it was not my fault, and that I am quite exhausted and heartbroken. Need I say more?